

BITTER WATERS

By

HEINRICH HAUSER

Translated by

PATRICK KIRWAN

Preface by

LIAM O'FLAHERTY



WITHDRAWN
HIRAM COLLEGE LIBRARY

F
H/au



HORACE LIVERIGHT

NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1929,
HORACE LIVERIGHT, INC.

Manufactured in the U. S. A.

PREFACE

HEinrich Hauser is one of the most astounding men I ever met. Just as the hurricane comes suddenly out of the ocean, bringing with it terror of its strength, joy at its speed and its vitality and amazement at the force of life that can produce such a phenomenon, so did I meet this man and was impressed by his personality.

It was in Dublin last year. I had just returned from London and was asked by a friend to call on Hauser, who had come to Ireland on a wild goose chase, such as only a man of genius could conceive. In fact, he had come there, with hardly any money, to make a film, accompanied by his wife and a Zeiss camera.

I am always polite to strangers and always suspicious of them. It is a relic of the various wars and revolutions in which I have taken part. Every stranger is a potential enemy, whose capacity for evil is not yet measured. And politeness is the best weapon with an enemy. But almost at once

PREFACE

I realised that this was a man in a million that I had met, an extraordinary personality that might have stepped out of those obscure Middle Ages in continental Europe, with that odd expression of eye and that fierce vitality which is so terrifying to those confounded people that are always crying for the normal; because they confuse the normal with the mediocre; with themselves.

He told me about his film. I have no interest in these things. I was disappointed that his wild eyes, with the lust of conquest and creation so strong in them, could conceive of no more fitting thing, upon which to spend his strength. He asked me to show him Dublin. I asked him what part of Dublin did he want to see. The intellectuals? The bourgeoisie? The spectacles? No. He had seen all these already. He did not like them. They were only a provincial replica of similar types and scenes in Berlin, London and Paris, not so vicious, not so interesting, not so pretentious. He wanted to see what was peculiar to Dublin, the amazing slums, with its incomparable collection of human beings, beautiful to the artist, who sees in them models for a thousand hells a thousand times greater than that of Dante. And to

PREFACE

the slums we went, with the camera, hunting fine specimens, followed by hordes of children, by ragged harlots, by old men with the itch, by crippled beggars, among herds of goats and asses that fed on waste plots, making pictures that should fill the world with horror, of a ruined city, uniformly unkempt and diseased, from the broken pavements to the souls of its inhabitants.

I don't know what happened to the film we made. Probably it was badly made, it was no good. I am sure it was no good. That was not important. What was important was that I saw this man reacting to these sights and saw them with him. Any fool can see beauty in pretty things. It is only the man of genius that can see beauty in ugliness. I said to myself that this man was worthy of seeing my Ireland. So I invited him to accompany me thither.

That journey down to the Aran Islands and our stay there were both wonderful. I shall never forget looking down over a precipice near my native village with Hauser. It was the scene of one of my short stories, the one I love best. I felt that if his presence made the scene vulgar, robbed it of its tremendous age or if he reacted in

PREFACE

an alien way that I could no longer believe in him. But he fitted in. Then I was certain that he was a genius and that he would do wonderful things. How? I didn't know. As a writer? It was impossible to say.

There are some writers whom one immediately recognises, bookish fellows, whose drawing-room civilisation obtrudes unpleasantly on the senses. They are just writers, no matter how great. But there are others who are great men, because they are men and who write because chance turns their energies towards writing as a means of creation. These are the men I love. Out of their speech, out of their eyes, out of the movements of their bodies, joyousness and exuberance flow and they make you feel that it is good to be alive. Women turn their heads when they pass or enter a room. Men like to drink with them, or to go with them on a long dangerous journey. They cause tumults. Priests denounce them. The dull fear them and say that they are dangerous and disreputable. Critics do not know what to make of their work; and only when they are dead, do the critics come from the caves, where they have been hiding from the hurricane of genius, to write scholarly dis-

PREFACE

sertations on the beauty of the hurricane that has passed, having wasted its beautiful frenzy.

I believe Heinrich Hauser belongs to this great group of men. Whether he is going to continue as a writer I know not. It is only the bookish fellows who are tied to their trade. I should not be surprised if I heard to-morrow that he had gone with a band of followers to seize Afghanistan or Tibet; had committed suicide; or set out on an attempt to fly to the moon.

Hauser is only twenty-six. He is still more wonderful in himself than anything he could produce. My sole interest in writing this preface is to tell people, not about his book, but about himself. There are so few interesting people in the world that their names should be shouted from lofty places. Of course, I know that *Bitter Waters* has been hailed as the book of the year in Germany by eminent men like Thomas Mann and others; but one does not like to praise in public the work of a friend.

LIAM O'FLAHERTY.

PART ONE

BITTER WATERS

CHAPTER I

ABLE SEAMAN GLEN awoke at midnight. It was very dark in the fo'c'sle, dark and hot. A bluish reflection fell through the porthole, the light of one of the arcs above the quay striking the dusty cement track. A second reflection, a sickly turgid yellow, trickled through the open door. The door led to the hatchway, the hold gaped open and a lamp hung from the deck in the shaft that none might hurtle down the plumb sixteen metre abyss to the bilge boards. Nevertheless it was so dark in the fo'c'sle that anyone standing in the narrow alley between the bunks could not have seen the movement of the thin coverlet wrapped about him. He awoke from deep dreaming; it was as though he was being strangled with a broad rough strap drawn taut about his neck and scraping away the skin; he was almost choked before he succeeded in awaking. His first movement was to clutch at his neck.

BITTER WATERS

There was nothing there: the skin was smooth and nothing pressed about it. He felt behind him and found the back of his head arched rigidly and pressed against the pillow. The tense pressure had come in sleep; he had hoisted himself in the bunk to kick his feet free from the coverlet. This was not the only cause of his nightmare of strangulation; he was accustomed to good sound sleep wherever he might be. The air held something that could not be breathed, a choking gas that wrapped his head in a tight swathing of suffocation and made him retch as though with seasickness.

He could not awake to proper sense but lay in a torpid half-sleep, a half-consciousness of danger and a half-consideration of the problem of what to do next. Suddenly he was seized with terror. It was the illuminated face of a watch swinging from a strap tied to the mattress of the bunk above. The figures of the hours shone like rats' eyes. He had only owned the watch three weeks. At first he had always reached beneath his bunk for a boot to fling at the gleaming rat eyes.

It was this shock that first set his brain working. —“It was only the watch. What a rotten dream.

BITTER WATERS

Rotten air here. The ventilator doesn't seem to work. It's always hot in dock. Besides we're lying port side to the quay again, portholes flush with the sides. And they expect air to come through. Anyhow it's a rotten berth. Sixteen men here. An old ship. The portholes always so close to the dockside that no air can come through. A terrible stink in here—I'd like to know what it is. And the snoring!"

Glen had served three months on the ship; he knew his shipmates. At night he could tell them by their snoring. In the corner near the door where two bunks lay side by side there came from both ends the snores of the two enemies. They were an old man and a young man. Neither could abide the other, and when they lay cheek by jowl there was a scuffle nearly every night. One would strike out at the other in his sleep. They changed directions so that they lay head to feet. At night, before sleeping when the lamp was dimmed, they thrust their sweaty feet in each other's faces. In the bunk above Glen the iron laths creaked; a fat deck hand tossed and turned in his sleep, the laths curved deeply downwards and the watch sank flush with Glen's coverlet. Above, to the left, came

BITTER WATERS

loud and sonorous snoring—a musical man who played the fiddle between watches; musical men are nearly all loud snorers. Next to Glen slept a remarkably filthy youngster. Glen had known for two days that the man had syphilis and for two days he had been careful to avoid touching him. It was difficult to do this without the other noticing; he was sensitive and thought syphilis a child's ailment. Only one slept silently, a tall slim man of thirty: the one real communist in the crew, ordered aboard as an agitator by the Communist Seamen's Union.

Only four men were absent from their bunks. They had gone ashore after supper and were now probably scattered in various brothels.

Glen reflected: "I shan't be able to sleep again. The light coming from outside must be from one of the arcs. The scraping on the starboard is the ebb sucking the river seawards.

"A funny river—so many dead big fish floating downstream as we put in. The river face gleams with oil. Everything here is oil. Perhaps it is the oil in the air that we can't breathe. I ought to get up. The four who've gone to the knocking shops aren't the biggest fools by a long way. Per-

BITTER WATERS

haps I ought to wake the others—they can't breathe and they don't notice it. But they'd only curse. Maybe I'm the only bad one. Have I eaten something rotten? I'd like to get up—but the cigarettes aren't about."

Glen felt with his toes for his things lying in a bundle below in the bunk. Shirt, trousers and cap. The shoes, canvas working shoes, were underneath the bunk. It was Monday, so the shirt and trousers were fairly fresh and scarcely sweaty. This did not help him to find them—it is always easier to find clothes in the dark when they are sweaty—but it made getting up easier. He had washed himself earlier in the evening and no one likes to wear dirty clothes on a clean body. He threw his legs over the bunk edge and pulled on shirt and trousers. They were thin and bleached from constant laundering and full of spots of varying colour. He stood upright and held fast to the bunk stanchions, reeling with suffocation. His cigarettes lay under the linen at the top of the tin box near the bunk. The tin flap creaked loudly but none of the men were awakened. He left the box open. He had the feeling now that he must hurry, a feeling as though he were a diver who has

BITTER WATERS

just noticed his temples throbbing and must get to the surface with all speed, a kind of unreasoning simian-climbing impulse.

As he climbed the high weather step—both hands tight pressed against the door jambs, so weak he felt—he could hear the snoring of the stewards through the opposite door.

A patch of sky hung in the square hatchway, pale, misty and spattered with a couple of stars and an iron ladder swooped down from above like the ladder in Jacob's dream. Wooden perches were clamped fast to each rung and on them parrots slumbered, yellow-polled and red-polled, their heads thrust under their wings. Young parrots, clad in their first sparse spiky plumage, babbled in their sleep like children, friendly and stupid. A cockatoo awoke as Glen brushed his perch, flung up a pale white eye-lid and shrieked "Arriva? Arriva?"

Glen went to the storekeeper's bar, down a narrow alleyway of white enamelled sheet-iron. A bulb with two weary filaments hung behind a thick rust of wire cage and threw heavy yellow light on the upturned empty beer barrels on which the guests had to sit. In the clean glass case next to

BITTER WATERS

the bar gleamed the mementoes bought by the steerage passengers: inlaid mother-of-pearl pictures of the ship in a life-belt frame, bottles of scent, seasickness specifics, handkerchiefs embroidered in the colours of the ship, postcards of the first-class dining saloon and the company's pennant. Glen stumbled past, eyes closed, still half dazed by the unaccustomed light. He steadied himself on the wooden rails that ran like a banister along the iron bulkheads of the alleyway. He lifted his feet instinctively at the high weather steps, bent his head and glided without collision among the steam pipes and ventilators. He knew the lay of the ship.

He found the bars of the heavy doors that led for'ard and loosed them. A yard before the door curved the steel wall of the bulwarks, bending inwards around the whole of the foredeck. Glen sat on the broad edge and tried to draw breath, to come to himself. "It's no good," he said, aloud, "it's just the same merde here as down below. You can't breathe here any more than there. There must be some place where a man can breathe."

He looked about him. The deck was a forest

BITTER WATERS

of mighty wind shields and wind traps: ventilators of great height and great width whose broad mouths gaped in every direction because no breeze stirred to which they could be set. The thick gasping breath of the men below, stokers, trimmers, deckhands, quartermasters and stewards, poured out from them in thick columnar streams. They lay on sweat-soaked bunks in the tropic heat of the bowels of the foreship, and tossed in their worthless tiring tropic slumber. Dull stars hung between the white pillars of the ventilators. Thick heavy ropes ran sheer to the heavens and disappeared in white mist, ropes that led to the masts. The handspikes of the anchor windlass stood at a man's height and shewed like spear points against the moon. Below the river's surface the ebb-tide sucked past the ships' sides and muttered a trembling resonance, the noise a finger makes scraping over the frame of a bass fiddle, magnified a thousandfold.

Glen sighed: he threw his cigarette stump over the rails and clambered towards the foremast, balancing carefully on the tin shod steampipes of the winches. "It's no use," he thought, "I must go aloft. The gas lies over the earth like a mist, and

BITTER WATERS

the higher I get the better. I'll blacken my hands on the iron ladder. I'd like to know where all the rust comes from. The moon rises late in these parts; it must be one o'clock or later. It's fat and yellow. It's lying on its back. Here in the tropics it always lies on its back when it's half-moon. It looks like one of the roasted carcasses they have on the saloon counters in Buenos Aires, the belly cut open and stuffed with onions and yellow fat. When I reach up for the rungs the moon's light shines straight in my eyes. Each time, as I go up from rung to rung I must bend back my head farther and farther to see it. I'll have to watch myself. It's just the same as when you've slept in the crow's nest. Climbing down you want to leave go with your hands to get down quicker."

Glen climbed; hand over hand he clutched the rungs of the iron ladder and drew up his feet after his swaying body. He climbed through the thick black curling smoke of the funnels to the trap door in the crow's nest bottom. He clambered inside and dropped the trap and drew himself up to the edge of the nest. The "nest" was an iron cylinder nearly the height of a man rivetted to the enormous hollow steel column of the mast.

BITTER WATERS

A heavy bronze bell spread like a hood over the look-out and a thick plaited rope hung down from the bell-tongue. The men had placed a small plank between the "nest" edge and the mast and the mast served as chair back. They sat there at their post, rocking gently and drowsily in quiet weather and swooping backwards and forwards far out over the ship's rails with the swaying of the mast in a storm. Old sacks lay strewn along the bottom to wrap about legs and shoulders in the cold spells.

Glen climbed on to the plank and did the first thing that any look-out man does—he lit a cigarette and gazed about him. He saw the cluster of broad stays that formed the riggings, the cowls of the Samson-posts with their great rope topping-lifts and down below the familiar outline of the foredeck. With a fleeting glance he saw the silver-grey ribbon of mist that was the Rio Panuco and on the right bank a couple of lights over where, by day, the white squat towers of the oil tanks stood and far beyond the white beams of the lighthouse playing on the sea and the waste of sand. Before him stretched the chaotic silhouette of masts, funnels, deck-cabins, and tackle

BITTER WATERS

of the mile long chain of ships lying bow to stern and stern to bow along the quay, each with gleaming anchor lights and port anchor cast in accordance with harbour rules. Behind he saw the squat rectangles and broad roofs of the warehouses. The fine twin strands of railroad track gleamed like drawn nickel wire in the wide round pools of light falling conically from the arc lamps. And behind these he saw the lights of the city, first gleaming levelly and then rising beyond in a slow upward curve. They gleamed bright and harsh, glorious and impudent, in the almost starless tropic night. They were more than mere illumination. They blazed like fireworks in pride and arrogance of new-found riches. The city stood on sand and everywhere the sand was tough and sticky-oil! Oil had thrust the city forth from the sand and had given root to the forest of oil tanks, the thousands of long wooden huts, the clean white standardised houses of the employees of the American companies and the ordered fungus growth of factory chimneys. From the interior ran the "tuberias," the hundreds of miles of pipe-line, that fed the city. The ships sucked the oil into their bowels. The ships rode under full steam with

BITTER WATERS

empty high red bellies round the sand-bar and up the Rio Panuco. They made fast to the quay and while the crew still hauled at their ropes the huge metal pipes swung aloft on the cranes, plunged in the oil tanks and the men ashore, their oil-soaked overalls gleaming like spotted walrus pelts, opened the valves. The tubes reared like snakes, and swelled and twitched under the pressure of the coursing oil. In eight and ten and twelve hours ten thousand tons had flowed and the tanks were filled. The sirens wailed and with the new turned tide the ships pulsed laden and burdened downstream, to Europe and to North America. Many men had sailed year after year between Tampico and some or other port of the New or Old World and yet had never set foot in Mexico. Time was too precious.

They would have liked time. For even as the ship pushed nose upstream the girls came waving from the filthy wooden hovels along the shore—the gayly clad “dollies” from the brothels near the oil works, prelude to the vast brothel quarter on the hill’s crest above the city. The men on deck, standing by at the ropes to make fast, heard them call and saw them run along the river bank, each

BITTER WATERS

little pack whipped in by a couple of men with binoculars. They heard their voices, "Hi-hi," "Come on, Jack," and "Pst-hey!" From the high decks the sailors watched the tiny figures and their harsh bright finery with keen excited eyes. The men at the wheel watched them through their glasses and the girls lifted their ragged skirts.

There are more brothels in Mexico than in any other country in the world and in no other town in Mexico is their own exclusive district so extensive as in Tampico. It is a town within a town. And nowhere are there women of such racial variety, multi-hued, mixture of every nation, and nowhere in the world do they bring such ill-luck to the seafarer.

Glen knew Tampico. He knew the district where the huts lay bogged in the oil swamp and the cavitous streets running with slime and sewage where the lean dogs and black pigs slunk and snuffled in the filth and where every house stood with open door and gleaming windows and the big bed and girls sitting on the stools at the door with cigarette and lip stick.

Now he could breathe. He was wide awake and the lights excited him. He did not want to

BITTER WATERS

go back to the pestilential stink between decks nor to the foul stench rising from the oil-soaked earth. He looked at the hill beyond the city. There was no stench. There the air was clean and fresh as at the masthead—there where the brothels lay. A quick tingling stung his flesh, a desire to fling off inertia. He thought of money. He still had a few pesos in his pocket. It all seemed inevitable even down to the fact that he had swilled and cleaned his body. He threw his cigarette away and slipped down from his perch into the nest.

At midday he had received his blue shoregoing suit freshly washed and pressed from the Chink laundryman. Chinese are the launderers on all big ships—they work hard and well at their own job. Most seamen wash their own clothes but Glen never grudged the few pesos he paid the Chinamen. They did the washing cheaply and gladly, as they always went in fear of being thrashed by the men. The suit was like new. The wool was good. It sat close at the waist and the lapels were broad and the collar a little shiny. The trousers were bell-bottomed and had a flap at the front.

Down in the dark fo'c'sle again he began to

BITTER WATERS

fumble in the tin box for his clothes. His shore-going shoes, brown and old but well tended, lay under the bunk. He had white socks, American and five cents a pair, and you wore them until they were done and then threw them away. He took a clean pair from the middle of the pile. His shirt was khaki yellow and fairly thick, an English military shirt with breast pockets and a permanent collar that could be worn without a jacket. It had been washed so often that all the seams were white. He chose the tie by the feel of it, broad black silk with wide red stripes.

He slung his working clothes in a bundle under the bunk and carrying his shore togs pressed close to his naked body went out to the wash-house to dress. Scraps of toilet soap lay in a wash basin. He washed his hands. Hard work had grained deep black lines in the flesh folds and a black crust lay under the nails. It needed eight workless days ashore to cleanse them of dirt. He looked at them angrily and smelled them. He could smell the scent of the soap. He stood in the brightly lit washroom naked and alone. The bulkheads were whitewashed and shower douches ran along the ceiling. He stood on the concrete floor that

BITTER WATERS

led beyond to the open closets. In a corner a pool of soapy water was beginning to stagnate. The room stank of stagnant suds, sweat and the closets. He combed his wet hair in the single glass nailed at a man's height in the corner. He made himself as presentable as he could: a fine well-built young fellow of two and twenty but not too young to be credited with a couple of hard years at sea. Not alone on hands and face but all over his body his skin was tanned deep brown. His head was small and thin cheeked and the eyes lay so deep-set that it was hard to tell their colour. They were a hard and curiously even blue. He felt for his watch and money. He was ready.

Glen was not hungry but he knew that he would drink ashore and that it was better to eat first. He went to the mess-room. The light in the mess-room burned the night through. Two long bare wooden tables ran the length of the two bulk-heads and two low backless benches. Heavy blobs of moisture sweated from the cork ceiling. Bread crusts and dirty plates littered the table and a few tin mugs half filled with tea and coffee. A couple of cheap adventure stories lay on the table.

BITTER WATERS

He took a mug and dipped it in the big cold tea can that hung from a hook on the wall. He opened the grub box: cockroaches and beetles scuttled to their holes before the sudden flood of light. He searched for his plate among the others. Like them all it looked frowsy and insect devoured. There was yellow cheese and hard red sausage plentifully studded with white raw fat. The sausage was sewn in white sized linen. He took it to the table and began to chew it; with his free hand he turned the pages of the "Band of Terror."

Five minutes later he put his cap on his head and went. Beyond the dully lit gangway lay the night. Steam rose from the pipes on the iron deck and the winches gleamed. Little rivulets of boiling water ran from the cylinders to the scuppers. A white flat circle swayed in the 'tween deck darkness—the bosun's white cap. His face was dark mahogany and invisible, as though there was space between jacket and cap and it was only seen when he drew at his pipe and its outline hardened in the red glow. Every night he paced the 'tween deck, hour for hour and ever quicker. He was waiting for the malaria bout that attacked him regularly on each Tampico trip. He was a big muscular man

BITTER WATERS

of forty. Five years ago, before sickness began to sap him, he had been strong as a bull. Hauling in the boats he had manned one rope alone while four men manned the other and always his end of the boat rose quicker than the other. Now he pondered through the whole of his quick short pacing if there might not be a long voyage to some climate where malaria would not clutch him. He never could find such a trip.

Without looking up he was aware of Glen's step. He recognised it as he recognised the step of any of the crew. He noted him in his mind. He noted everything without a glance.

A trimmer, on watch, went in front of Glen. He carried a bucket of washed, wrung clothes and dived into the stokehold to dry them. It is peculiar to stokers and trimmers that however fine the weather, warm the sun, or dry the wind, they never dry their clothes in air and light but hang them in the stokehold near the steampipes where they dry in half an hour hard as stone, stiff with heat and full of coal dust. Their clothes creak as they draw them on and crack like tin, but it does not matter much about the rags they wear at work. The trimmer shivered. He wore nothing but a

BITTER WATERS

coarse string vest, blue pants and a sweat rag knotted about his neck. His skin was pallid, freckled and unhealthy. Glen knew him; he saw him go to the doctor every morning at eleven. In Porto Mexico he had gone to a Mexican soldiers' brothel. He said it was safer there because the girls were under government control and inspected regularly. He was mistaken. The medical officer doctored him up so that he need not "lay off." The captain expected this. He walked slowly with straddled legs. He was a good fellow and like all good fellows proud that he did not cry off until all could see he was no longer fit to crawl.

There was a light behind the dark teak wall of the captain's cabin. Glen saw the light. No one ever knew what the old man did, whether he slept or waked. None knew him, not even his steward, who had sailed fifteen years in the same ships. In Hamburg, his wife always came aboard for a quarter of an hour and then left straightway. She was afraid of him. Maybe now he sat in the creaking basket chair behind the bridge sucking at the grey crusted glow of his long cigar and pondering on things that none below could understand.

BITTER WATERS

The promenade deck was empty. The deck planks were wet and smoothly clean. The rivet heads that everywhere studded the white enamelled bulkheads of the deck cabins were beaded with salt water from the deck swabbing. A foaming rivulet streamed from one of the red painted water taps. The deck lamps hung immersed in the dirty water that had collected in their glass shields. Glen began his journey. With long strides he trod down the gangway that hung between the middle of the promenade deck and the quay, propping his heels against the cross pieces of the swaying slanting bridge.

He went along the quay. The cement was hard, harder than the wooden deck planks and harder than the iron deck plates. Seamen's feet are easily tired ashore. As he passed he glanced at the port side where he had been working in the afternoon. It was spotted with red rust. Long red stripes ran down to the waterline from where the closet overflow ran. The paint always went there first. He followed the bank down river along the almost endless line of ships. Unconsciously he noted the signs that betrayed their nationality and class. The Yankees he recognised by the angular silhouettes

BITTER WATERS

of the hulls and the thick manilla ropes that moored them to the quay. America is rich. She can afford the toughest cables, yet light enough to float in water. The Dutchmen carried their names in great wide-spaced lettering on the bridges above and were made fast with steel cables plaited with hemp. The ore carriers lay next the quay where the sealed rail trucks stood, painted with the big white letters of the Mexican State Railways. The dust of the interior, that mysterious country where no seaman ever set foot, lay thick upon the oily trucks and tenders. The gangway of every ship was lowered and on every gangway hung a petroleum lamp, on all except a filthy old Greek tramp.

In the light of the arc lamps he saw the word "Douane" painted across the whole of the shed front that lay on the right; he clambered over the coupling between two trucks. Suddenly he stood in a large square planted with the dry ragged palms that stand as official intimation of Tampico's beginnings. The square was empty.

Hundreds of iron chairs were ranged about the pavilion where the military band played in the evenings. The asphalt was still a gleaming polished

BITTER WATERS

black from the evening automobile parade. Paper lay strewn on the sparse scanty lawns. Both palms and grass had that peculiar wilting deadness that all plants assume after too frequent contact with humanity. Deep exhaustion makes them droop and they die. In the night they gather no dew. The paper-strewn grass bore witness to the thousands of feet that circulated around the pavilion each evening—the top-boots of the military, the naked feet of little bootblacks, the slim pointed heels of the girls, the pretty creoles and lovely girls with cold hearts and fiery great eyes walking in threes and fours—the broad shuffling boot soles of the old women who walk behind the girls and watch them narrowly.

The life of a Mexican town dies late. And even when the town is dead, it is rush hour in the brothels. Men on a drunk, men who cannot sleep, seafaring men, all these find their way to the brothels, even those seamen who are strangers to the town. It is a kind of instinct, akin to a feeling for weather, a nose for "trouble." The bosun, for instance, had never in his life seen Genoa before the ship touched there, but he followed his nose

BITTER WATERS

and led his mates through every one of the forty-eight brothels that Genoa boasts.

Glen took a street car. Often he did things like this, things foreign to the seaman's ways. It is a fact that many sailors are afraid of electric cars and even turn about when they see the lines of the track. They consider electric cars very dangerous. This is due to the fact that the street cars begin where the sailors' world, the dockside, ends. There were few people in the open car and these all men. The lonely tram careered through the deserted streets, bell hammering, wheels rattling, and crashing over points and curves. It was the last car and the driver was in a hurry. Glen could see inside the houses where the lights still blazed. Doors were open and curtains undrawn. The rooms were bare and crystal lustres hung from the ceilings. He could see young ladies playing pianos. It is astonishing how many pianos there are in Mexico and how little other furniture. In some houses the girls swung themselves in wooden rocking chairs before large mirrors. A man lay in bed and read a newspaper called "El buen Tono."

The bell rang and the men climbed out of the

car. They had reached the hill top where the brothel streets began. They did not look at one another but dispersed quickly as though ashamed of their errand.

Tampico's love quarter consists of streets which are not really streets but ditches, deep-furrowed rain channels and stagnant filth and which, on the other side of the hill away from the town, converge into some oil swamp. The houses have only one storey. They are built of boards, of corrugated iron, of concrete and lath and in front of them runs a wooden sidewalk so narrow and so pitted that in many places only one man can pass. Drunkards must be on their guard against falling in the stinking gutters where the black pigs wallow and the mangy stray dogs whine. Most of the houses have only one room, a bare room with a big bed and a washstand. There are pictures on the walls, saints and the holy family and obscene Parisian postcards. At the back the room is partitioned off with boarding or bead curtains. It stands as a kind of fence and there the hammocks are slung. There is at least one girl to every house—often three or four. Each house has a

BITTER WATERS

large door and is brightly lit so that the street is luminous as a main thoroughfare although there are no street lamps. Little saloons stand at the street corners and they sell pulque and whisky and play automatic pianos. They are bare, brightly lit and sober. Outside are the street kitchens, red coals gleam under the bars cooking strange and dangerous dishes swimming in prickling sauces, aphrodisiac and appetising. Groups of men always stand at the street corners; men who hesitate to take the street, silver-spurred peons tightly clutching the pesos in their pockets, the same pesos that they fling away so bravely a few paces beyond. Soldiers: the Mexican army is not well paid but what it receives finds its way to the brothels. Men as to whose character there can be no doubt lurk motionless in the shadow of the walls. Only their eyes move and they follow the drunkards who stagger alone and their gaze pierces the sailors' pockets. Reek of perfume and roasting meats, pestilential slime, sewage, automatic music.

The girls sit before their houses. Most sit on stools, others lean in the garish light against the doors. They are grouped by nationality.

Native products and imports hold fairly equal

balance. There are many Jewesses and many Germans who always call "Landsmann" to the German sailor. French girls are not so numerous and English still rarer. The European whores are more shameless than the native. They run in front of men in the street, call them, clutch their arms. They wear fewer clothes. Many stand in the doorways white and almost naked in their transparent underclothing. The Mexican girls are quieter. They crouch in gay, garish evening dresses before their doors. They stare fixedly, eyes wide with *bella-donna*, lips darkly red and often only when a man pleases them do they push a foot quietly in front of him. If the man halts, the girl rises after a few words, pushes her stool inside the door and closes the shutters. For a time a black gap breaks the street's glare; throughout the night these black spaces travel backwards and forwards along the street like fading letters on a slow moving sky sign.

When a girl of this kind has entertained two or three "guests" she closes her house for the night. It is a sympathetic trait in the Mexican whore that she does not have too many men in one night. There are few pure creoles of Spanish origin

among them. Most are mixtures; Indo-creoles, Creole-negresses, Indo-negresses, Indo-Japanese are numerous, young and often very beautiful girls with cool smooth skins of all shades, matt yellow, brown, grey and greenish. If a poor-class Mexican girl fails to find a husband at eighteen, it is not considered a scandal nor a shame that she goes into a brothel.

There was one high-class street in the district. It lay on the hill-crest, following its length along, and the brothel alleys branched from it like the teeth of a comb. It was broader and better kept. It was paved and automobiles could travel it. It was as thick with saloons as lamps at a Venetian fête—dance halls with brothels attached. The most elegant lay in the centre of the street between two side alleys and the cheapest, and most frequented, at the corners.

When one goes to the brothels as does the seaman, that is, not to have a look at them, but for the ultimate purpose for which they exist, he sees and observes from a one-sided point of view. The seaman does not apprehend it as a whole. He does not see the brothel street with its houses; it does

not interest him. In all countries they are pretty much the same. He does not visualise the organisation behind them, the money side of it. He knows, of course, it is there but he does not wish to know it. He never looks beyond the deceptive, treacherous surface. A whore with peroxide hair and kiss-curls, a powdered painted face, fat and scarcely human, is a "pretty baby" to the sailor. He believes ardently and trustfully in her rosy cheeks and pink girlish clothes and in her innocence. And he believes because ultimately every man seeks in every woman, however vile, something more than mere sexual satisfaction. "Ten years in a brothel and still a virgin." The apparent cynicism of a common remark of these women is the expression of a naïve expectation that, either consciously or unconsciously, is shewn them by many men. It is a phrase that works as successfully as does that other and meaner lie—"give me a baby." The seamen believe with a grateful heart; it would not otherwise still be possible for the sentimental "whore's life stories" to be in circulation among them and strangely enough their naïve belief is often near the truth. The fate that throws a girl on the streets is often far more dread-

ful than the fantasy she later tells. And—no one can live without hope—always she has a glimmering of hope that one day things will mend, that one day someone will turn up to take her from the brothel. This is only true of the Europeans. Coloured girls think and feel so differently that no European can feel or think with them. Their thought is more sober, without fantasy or obsessed by a fixed idea. They live in full consciousness of their situation. Imported Europeans often only learn the full weight of the iron bonds of white slavery in the lowest seaman's brothel in Tampico. First come the "fine" houses in Mexico City, then relegation to the low class, transportation to the ports, to Vera Cruz, Tampico or Porto Mexico. Then comes the great and ultimate nothingness.

Glen traversed the dance hall streets and searched for a good place. He spied through the doors, made Spanish fashion of plaited straw and spanning half the doorway, as he passed. Above the doors he could see the dancers' heads and their feet below. He searched long. He walked along one side of the street and back again down the other side. At each saloon he paused a second or

so to listen to the music. In the matter of music you could exercise a real choice, the woman you got was more or less a matter of accident—you only really saw the woman when it was too late to draw back. Neither was this in accordance with seagoing ways. Glen believed himself shrewder than the others, because he picked and chose by the music. In reality it was foolish. It is always better never to visit the brothels alone but to go in a gang and to make your own jollity and hilarity rather than await it from others. If you go alone you are nearly sure of disappointment. And it is better not to be too fastidious about a girl you only want for an hour. It does not matter much about the face—"you can always cover it up with an old newspaper" say the seamen.

Glen decided on "El Aquila de Monterey" and he thrust aside the straw swingdoor with his chest. The nigger band he had heard from outside had kicked up such a tremendous noise that he expected a crowded riot of merriment. The moment he opened the door the music stopped and the quiet and emptiness of the saloon astounded him.

Behind the bar, which stretched nearly the whole saloon's length, emerged the thin tight

BITTER WATERS

wrinkled face of an American—an unpleasant face, harsh and unscrupulous, hypocritical and brutal. He wore a long narrow white apron. When he came from behind the bar you saw it almost reached to the ground. He threw Glen a quick but expert glance; from long practice he could tell in a moment whether a man was drunk or sober. All further dealings depended on this fact. Glen was sober—more sober than is usual in a seaman. He went to an empty table not far from the door and sat down. The waiter came, a supple young Mexican with very oily black hair. “Beer,” said Glen. It was always a good thing to drink a couple of quick glasses before you invited a girl to the table.

He looked around. Scarcely a minute had passed since his entry. Many of the girls who sat along the wall were still giving him their first appraising glance. It was a place for coloured girls. They do not stare so impudently in a man’s face, they peer with lowered heads through their lashes.

“It’s like every other place,” thought Glen. “It’s all mirrors, engraved in black, red and gold with brewery signs—they get them for nothing.

Mexicans won't come in here. When they see the lanky Yank behind the bar they turn away. All the men here are from the sea. Two are Americans. The rotten sort. Seem to be beachcombers. They'll have the police here if they don't stop their boozy antics. There are half-castes as well. The girls are pretty, real flowers stuck in their bosoms. The beer bottles are damned small. Beer in the tropics always tastes of chemicals. That's why the labels are so magnificent. Half a peso a bottle—regular brothel price. The niggers will play again in a minute. I'll wait for it. I must watch how the girls dance. You can't judge them sitting down. Some have a fellow already and I must know which. In a place like this they're changing about the whole time. Otherwise it's the same here as everywhere, too many lights and too many mirrors."

The niggers played. In front of the platform, against the wall, stood a negro who blew in a hollow melon. He splayed his flat palm over the holes in the fruit and the notes were hollow as from an ocarina, hollow but impudent and without sadness. The negro's eyes revolved slowly in their sockets as the dancers moved in a circle.

They followed a girl. On the platform the long back of another negro twitched over the piano keys. The great jazz drum stood so high that it was impossible to see who hammered it.

There were five or six couples. Three pairs of girls, a negro and a girl, a sailor and a girl. Often some man would jump forward from the bar and separate two girls and dance with one of them and then let her whirl away, too drunk for further steps. The girls who danced together swayed listlessly and aloof as though engaged in some unpleasant duty. They were lovely girls, rather dark skinned and plump. Their thin garish dresses stretched tight over their firm swelling bosoms. Their eyes were circled with blue black grease paint, the eyebrows plucked to thick black arches and the lips tinted dark red, very heavy and luscious. Their limbs were very slender and even their hips were slim. Their shoulders were beautiful and when they lifted their arms they disclosed a deep hollow of smooth hairless skin. They were girls who fulfilled the fancies of a sailor's dream. It seemed as though vice had magnified in them every sexual allurements almost into the grotesque.

BITTER WATERS

They danced with boredom but with restrained sensuality.

One of the two Americans danced with the only girl who was drunk, nearly as drunk as the man himself. She was European. While they danced it seemed as though he raped her. A disgusting sight. His face shone glassily over her shoulder. The hand which curved around her waist held her skirts high and she shewed naked under the skirt. Her legs looked ugly, bowed and with protruding knees. The man had lifted the girl almost entirely from the ground and swung her wildly prancing about the room. The floor cleared rapidly. The girl uttered little shrill shrieks that pierced the jazz noise. The drunken man hated the girl because she shrieked, because she was as filthily drunk as himself. He lifted her clean from the ground and swung her around him like a weight. She began to laugh. In the middle of a swing he loosed his grip on her body and with a shriek she crashed against the wooden planks of the counter, overturned a stool and fell to the ground. She lay half on her back, half on her side, her legs widestretched and skirts raised, and howled like a beast.

Glen caught the bartender's glance, saw the waiter hurry to the bar and saw both men in quick whispering converse. Glen looked at the American and thought: "If you were a sailorman, I'd give you the tip to clear, but you're only a bloody beachcomber."

The American stumbled to the bar, stood tightly clutching the counter and bending over the prostrate girl and cursed her in harsh, hot passionate tones. The slick waiter had taken off his apron. He disappeared through the door, a modest, dark caballero in a blue suit.

Glen knew what was going to happen but he took no part. There were two girls there, two girls who had danced together and then gone quietly to their table as though they felt insulted by the American's conduct. They were a type of girl Glen had never seen before, a racial mixture such as is probably only to be found in Mexico. They were Indo-Japanese. Both were beautiful and they might have passed for sisters, but Glen had only eyes for one. She was small and young, almost a child, a girl of fifteen. She had the lightest skin of all the girls in the saloon. A strange colour, like the shadows cast by young

trees, the blonde of ripe tobacco with a tinge of matt green. A skin whose silk and coolness was almost palpable to the eye, a skin of almost uncanny perfection. To touch such skin makes a seaman nervous and almost melancholy because he believes that the girl must be especially expensive. Such fineness can only be achieved with the aid of marvellous cosmetics—and you have only to look at the newspapers and bill boards to see what a price they are.

The girl wore a deep pink dress. A sprig of white sweet-smelling blossom lay across her shoulder, perhaps tobacco plant. Both girls danced with great reticence and economy of movement. Their steps were peculiarly short. They danced silently and now sat as silent and tight pressed each to the other as little birds on a tree branch. Their eyes were less almond slit than the eyes of pure blooded Japanese. They were large, luminous and filled with fear. They watched the doorway. Glen followed their gaze.

He saw the end coming. He saw the drunken American still swaying over the prostrate girl and saw him push back the sweat-trickling hair away

from his eyes under his cap. He saw the negro, tongueing the ocarina melon with alternately deflated and inflated cheeks, move white eyes under high lifted brows from the drunkard to the door. He saw the lanky bartender dry his hands on the white apron as though no glasses would be filled for the next few minutes. Glen felt in his pocket for his shore pass. The man behind the bar put both hands flat on the counter and laughed, revealing white square horse teeth. The music stopped and the girls rose, still in a tight embrace, and watched with fixed unmoving eyes. Howling, the girl who had fallen rubbed her leg. The American straightened himself confusedly and saw the policemen standing in front of him. Their hands were on his shoulders. He spluttered a torrent of English words and the man at the bar began to shout him down. The police remained silent. They gripped their man and dragged him out.

It had lasted scarcely a minute. The nigger at the piano hammered out a rousing march and the ocarina joined in. The couples danced again and with more abandon than before. The niggers

danced with shuffling, swaying feet quicker and quicker and their slim backs wriggled to the rhythm like fish hooked from water.

Time to leave. Glen saw how many men now began to gaze through the door and knew that they would enter, attracted by the commotion. He rose when the two girls had danced to within three paces of his seat. He stood there rather flushed and confused. Now he knew that the further events of the night would be decided. The girls danced past him, slowly, expectant and with large dispassionate eyes. He placed an arm between them and automatically the elder girl's hand fell from the shoulder of the girl in pink and she returned to her seat. The young girl smiled softly, and placed her right hand on Glen's shoulder. They danced together.

For a turn of the room Glen felt ill at ease. He was accustomed to steer his partner when dancing, but the girl took charge, gently yet decisively, as though she had expected he could not dance. She was in the habit of doing this; for the sake of her feet and good shoes it was better to guide the rough drunken men with whom she had to dance. She danced carefully so as not to be trodden upon.

Through the pink dress Glen could feel very soft flesh, unbelievably cool. He could not see her face; he was too tall and he looked down on a round head of dark, strong hair, greaseless but shining from long brushing. He saw the eyes fixed motionless on his breast as though the quiet soft orbs were gazing through and beyond him and he saw her skin from the neck down to where the small half-bared breasts disappeared closely in the tightness of the pink dress. Beneath the flat, low and firm pressure of his palm, he could feel the supple sway of her hips. She pleased him. He was still confused, but pleased his search was so well rewarded. Now all that counted was how much the fun would cost.

The intervals of saloon music are calculated to allow a sufficient consumption of drink. This is demanded by the saloon keeper. The saloon keeper also expects every girl immediately to ask her "friend" for a drink. Mexican girls are very sober and dislike getting drunk but as they have to drink a lot they take ginger ale. Ginger ale is a non-intoxicant, is the same price as beer and shows a greater profit. The girls always drink a whole bottle after each dance. The girl

BITTER WATERS

asked Glen if her friend might sit at the table with them. It meant double ginger ales and double expense. Glen was not overjoyed.

The girls powdered; coloured girls powder very white in order to look like Europeans; only the pure negresses are proud of their dark skins. In bad Spanish, Glen began to tell the girls that the fashionable ladies in Europe were now using dark powder.

CHAPTER II

GLEN fingered the silver in his pocket. Time to go. If the glasses emptied every two minutes there would soon be nothing left for the other business. He let the girl go in front of him—a measure of precaution—but kept close enough to enter the street at her side. He saw her glance rest a moment on the saloon keeper's rigid face, a glance that asked recognition of a task accomplished, but the saloon keeper gazed dispassionately past her.

Only a few paces separated the one task from the other. The girl's house lay where the street merged into an undulating steppe-land. The house was a wooden hut, a shanty the sailors call it, and a sign that a coloured girl lived there. The white girls had concrete houses. The house lay beyond the brightness of the street. The shutters were closed, and through the warped wood danced the flickering glow of an open fire. Glen was pleased that the house lay apart. He did not

like to be observed nor did he want shipmates to say to him the next day: "You had a flutter with so-and-so yesterday. I was with her the night before." The girl lifted the stool from the ground before the door and carried it inside. Glen followed. As she closed the door he looked around. There was only one room: through the low rafters he saw into the sloping roofs, and their lowness seemed to increase his height. The walls were of board and a wooden partition running half the height of the room cut off a corner. The floor was trodden earth. In the centre stood a broad bed, English export junk for niggers, imitation brass with rails decorated above with glass facetting. A great bunch of white odorous flowers was stuck in the head rail. In the corner to the right of the door was a wooden commode over which hung a mirror. It was draped with white lace and two holy pictures flanked the mirror. The room was swept bare, no clothes hung from the walls and the partition was hung with glass beading.

Glen sat cautiously on the red bedspread. He sat cautiously, expecting softness but the bed was hard. "Now she'll undress," he thought, "or she'll sit on my knees and make up to me and ask

how much money I'm going to give her and then the whole rotten business will start."

Outwardly, he sat passive, blowing the smoke of the cigarette he held hidden in his curved palm thinly through his lips but there was a roaring in his ears and his stomach was drawn tight with excitement. He wondered that the girl had not taken her chance to beg a cigarette.

Her conduct was strange, almost as though she were alone. Silently she crossed the bare earth floor to the commode and looked in the mirror and painted her lips. She did it clumsily—as a man threads a needle. She held the lipstick like a fork and drew her lips across its tip—one way of doing it!

It was quiet; he could hear the ashes sifting through the fire bars. There was an oppressive scent of flowers. The girl combed her hair before the mirror and he saw small electric sparks. She was silent.

An unusual feeling of awkwardness led his thoughts back to the past. He looked at his hands folded over the right knee. A long dark brown scar ran slanting to a point from forearm to wrist—a bullet wound. He had now the same feeling

BITTER WATERS

as when under fire for the first time during the war.

He lost the feeling of time. He saw the barrack stairs; it was dark and pale flames fluttered in the stairways like dirty rags. Night and day, blue flame tongues lolled from the gas brackets. At night on arms guard over the rifles stacked along the walls the flames sang and spluttered. The passage reeked of sweat and boot polish, fish-oil soap, steam and hot suds from the wash-house. The concrete floor was worn and uneven and black with the tramp of heavy boots. Recruits never dared walk through the passage. They were always given the command "Double-march" and they trotted until the low ceilings groaned.

On Saturday, on pay-day, they went to the brothels. There were three in the town, all called P.A. for short—the Pair of Aces, Port Arthur and Prince Albert. From the harbour came the wail of sirens from the old torpedo boats—they called them "sea-lice"—on night manœuvres. In the brothel parlour a couple of sailors swapped whispers, they waited patiently and without excitement. They went to the red-numbered houses as you visit a doctor. The girl whom Glen used to

BITTER WATERS

visit was engaged to a dentist; she stayed in the brothel until she had collected a sufficient dowry and then left it. At that time the girls preferred the ships' cooks for lovers. Food was scarce and the cooks stole the rating's rations.

Just before the Revolution there had been good comradeship among the lower deck. They met and talked through the night until the dawn came and revealed the green of the young trees on the harbour side. Then they went aboard arm in arm, the lamps still burned over the landing stage and swung in the morning breeze. Heavy steam clouds rose from the iron decks. The shadows of mast and tackle pierced deep in the steam and wavered there and the hum of dynamos rose from the engine room hatches. The ships shivered like reptiles. All the joints were loose, there was no more copper tubing and no real asbestos.

Glen became suddenly alert and completely sober. He rose erect and listened. He heard groaning behind the wooden partition. He looked quickly at the girl, but she had uttered no sound—her hand held the comb and she listened. He sprang to his feet ready for anything. Many

things could happen in this district. He clenched his fist in his pocket, pushed it forward so that it looked like the bulge of a gun. He wrinkled his brow. "No damned nonsense from you," he said to the girl, and it sounded threateningly.

She pulled an angry face as though to say "You're making a big mistake, mister." She rose slowly and, coming to the bed, took Glen by the wrist and her grip was so soft and light that he became quite helpless. She led him towards the bead curtain.

Across the tiny partition hung a broad hammock and it hung so low that its curves' lowest point brushed the ground and in it lay inflated a fat mulatto woman, white and soft as a bolster. Her black eyes rolled at Glen and wandered over the girl and a groan came from her rounded pouting lips. Her lazy yellow flesh oozed from her lace gown and bulged through the meshes of the hammock. She was one of the crones who act as housekeeper to the girls who live in the district. She held up a finger thickly swathed in filthy rag. It hurt her and she was groaning with the pain. At the top of the hammock where the net ropes converged, sat a dwarf parrot, a parakeet, such as

BITTER WATERS

is found in every Mexican hovel. Parakeets are cheap. You can buy one for fifty cents. They have red feathers on their crest and wings, they are very tame and as expert as a monkey with their feet.

Glen had to laugh at himself. He straightened his fingers in his pocket. There was no "bully" here—he had been invited as a European, as one who knew the art of curing a bad finger. God knows what it was, he hoped it was not syphilis. Both women looked at him fearfully and expectantly, and the old woman had tears in her dull eyes. Glen spoke to her kindly; he spoke in German, in words she could not understand, but the sound of his voice soothed her. Women like this are not used to kindness in a man's voice, least of all in Mexico. Glen spoke to her as the doctor had spoken to him as a child: "Now, keep quite still and we'll see what's wrong with the finger. Don't cry like that. We have to get rid of this rag. It's probably stuck a little, the finger's swollen. It can't be helped hurting a little. You must have had a wash sometime but it was a long, long time ago. When you cut your finger again, don't pick out the dirtiest rag you can find for a bandage.

It's a pity you can't understand all this or you might learn something in your old age. If I only had a piece of soap bathing might do some good. What's the Spanish for soap, hey?" Movement of washing with the hands—"neither understand. Probably never seen any."

He rummaged in his pockets. He turned them out and spread their contents before him—knife, keys, pouch, pipe, tobacco, coffee beans, tarred rope, cleaning waste, coins—and soap.

"Hot water—agua, agua calor, mucho calor."

He shredded the soap with his knife and stirred it in the water. The parakeet plucked at his jacket, gripped a fold with its claw and climbed trustfully to his shoulder to reach a gleaming button. He began to peck it.

The old woman began to laugh through the big tears that ran down her cheeks. The water scalded but it did her good. Glen looked at her with astonishment. It was strange to see a woman of her sort laugh from good nature. The girl laughed and her laugh gurgled deep in her throat. Glen again felt ill at ease, almost confused. The situation had altered. He found himself as though in the midst of a family when he had ex-

BITTER WATERS

pected something utterly different. Why had he come here?

"Mucho bono," said the old woman, "mucho bono."

She fell asleep almost immediately. Glen and the girl went back to the other room. Everything again became serious, business-like, almost sad. She took off her dress, folded it and hung it over the bed rail. She stretched herself on her back on the bed, as a matter of course, without surprise. She stuck a hunk of chewing gum in her mouth. She folded her arms beneath her head. She waited. As she chewed Glen saw her white teeth, moist and gleaming in her mouth's oval of healthy pink flesh.

Glen sat on the bed edge again, indecisive, depressed and disappointed. The last quarter of an hour had aroused decent human instincts and he had almost forgotten where he was—now he had to carry on from where he had left off. He did not know exactly how to deal with the situation. This was not the kind of brothel he was used to—it seemed damn like misery and white slavery. The girl lay there and did not look at him but

BITTER WATERS

stared at the roof with her large soft eyes. She chewed and waited. It was all the same to her.

It made him feel very sad.

The girl was beautiful. Her skin was so fine he felt ashamed to touch it with his rough hands. It was soft, unbelievably soft, a skin whose texture eluded the finger tips and was only tangible to the lips. And a colour—an Indo-Japanese with white blood—a mixture! Glen had never seen a woman so beautiful. He was astonished and laid his hand on his breast to feel his heart's beat; it pulsed fast and strong. He felt the fierce and throbbing excitation of a first love. He stroked her, he stroked her and it felt like fine sand that runs through the fingers. He laughed, mocking himself and hurting himself. She misunderstood his hesitation and misunderstood his stroking. She clapped her hand on her thighs. "Mucho bono."

Glen sat again on the bed edge. His heart throbbed no longer and he was passive. The girl had disappeared behind the partition to dress. Glen thought of smutty jokes and stories because at heart he felt sad. He felt sad always afterwards, this time as well. He thought of many yarns of the tricks that sailors play on girls they

BITTER WATERS

have slept with—when they know they are putting to sea the next day and the police cannot touch them. After the last night ashore the men bring aboard all manner of things they have stolen from girls. One brings an alarm clock, a feather boa to give his girl at home, one has a Paris album which amuses the crew the whole of the homeward voyage, and another who could find nothing better once brought a little dog under his arm.

The girl had gone. The dwarf parrot, the tiny parakeet, sat on a perch near the door and slept with white horny lids clapped down over its eyes. The girl was away strangely long—perhaps she would not come back.

For a moment he stood indecisive. Then he went to the door with long noiseless strides. With a single movement his hand closed about the parakeet so that it disappeared in his palm. Then he ran. He ran with crossed arms so as not to injure the parakeet and as he ran he pushed it inside his shirt. He turned the nearest corner sharply and the next and only slackened his pace when he reached a side alley that led to the docks.

The bird scratched angrily at his chest, and crawled under his shirt up on his shoulder.

CHAPTER III

IN every port where the workers are organised the loading and discharge of cargo is not done by the ship's crew but by stevedores.

For the two days since the ship's arrival there had been a dock strike in Tampico. This was the situation: the strike could only be successful if it actually held up the loading and discharge of cargo. This would cause agents and owners so much expense that they would be forced to give way to the strikers' demands. The agents and owners however were able—and when have they not been able?—to have recourse to the law's aid. Sea law, that invests the captain with punitive powers, forces the crew in such a case to discharge or load the ship.

Seamen belong as a trade to the same international organisation of transport workers as dockers, and when they are forced by law to do work properly within the dockers' province they are, in effect, stabbing the strikers in the back. To

refuse means being clapped in irons and imprisonment after trial.

The situation in Tampico port was tense. Mexican air is always pregnant with revolution. The crews of all the ships argued hotly below decks whether work should be refused or not. This night, the strikers had sent emissaries aboard the "Hispaniola" and held a kind of meeting in the mess-room.

The emissaries put their case: We know that you are solidly with us. We know, however, that your damned articles penalise refusal. We don't ask impossibilities of you. Discharge the cargo—but—you'll know how to do it.

All understood. A thrill ran down their spines, revolutionary fever; a big moment was at hand they felt, and there were many whose eyes gleamed when they thought of what would happen in the morning.

At seven o'clock in the morning Able Seaman Glen stumbled sleep-drunken from his bunk to the deck where the bo'sun was detailing the crew for work. Two hours of uneasy dreaming and the drink's hang-over had left him completely con-

fused. As he fumbled among his clothes he saw the little green bird he had stolen from the brothel all entangled in the string that tied it to the bunk. It squeaked plaintively and indignantly and took little staggering steps with its monkey feet in endeavour to get clear of the string. As Glen drew near it pecked at his finger. The tiny beak was so sharp that it pierced the harsh skin and drew blood. While the others shuffled in their wooden slippers to the deck, rolling the first cigarettes, Glen hurriedly nailed a couple of slats across an empty box and thrust the parakeet inside.

The bos'un acted as though nothing unusual were afoot. He knew what would happen and knew that he must let things take their course. He was just ill enough to be a fatalist. He sent his men down the hold as though everything were in order. "Glen and Antonio, take both winches at No. 4 hatch." There were wooden cases in No. 4. The spar deck and 'tween deck had been cleared by the dockers before the strike. There remained only the lower hold to be discharged, right and left of the tunnel that ran through the hold like a high dam.

It took an hour to remove the hatches. In the dull light and dusty sober cold of a Tampico morning a ship's crew feel far more inclined to thrust their hands in their pockets than to take them out. It was breakfast in an hour's time anyway and what was the use of working? The hatches were handled as tenderly and carefully as though they were newborn babes, carried each by two men with every fussy attention and laid gingerly and silently on deck. At other times—at other times they flung them, as it were, crash to the deck—but that was at other times.

While the six men on deck busied themselves with their hatches, Glen and Antonio above put the winches into gear. "I'm going to the engine room to get steam," said Antonio. In the meantime Glen naturally could do nothing more than stand at the rails, prop his chin on his hand and wait for steam. And the steam took a nice slice of the morning.

Suddenly the pipes began to rattle. The water collected in the tubes burst in little explosions and the scaling paint fluttered and fell. The winch cylinder warmed slowly. Antonio turned up again and now both tested the lever. They let the

machine run a few turns backwards and forwards—without opening the water cocks under the cylinders—it ran without that. The result was that their winches ran like an old imperfect motor with an erratic spark. Sometimes it ran; sometimes it stopped under full steam. Technical imperfections!

The bos'un passed by. Glen and Antonio shouted that the dockers had unfortunately left the gear in such a mess and tangle that it was impossible to work with it. The guys were run on to the wrong drums, the runners were falsely hooked and the derricks were in wrong position. The bos'un replied: "Clear up after breakfast." Two bells struck. "Breakfast up," shouted the six below and "Breakfast up," repeated the two above.

Breakfast.

At half past nine the captain appeared on the boat deck. At first he paced the bridge and watched irritably how slowly his crew sauntered about their work. He had expected them to be in the middle of it and that at least a couple of cases would be hauled up. Things moved too slowly for his liking. He was excited and angry

about it. He wanted his ship away, out of this hole Tampico. Tampico stank so mouldily.

The old hands among the crew wrinkled their brows wisely and knowingly: "Take it easy, ship-mates. The company won't pay for broken necks. Take it easy—and obey regulations."

No safety net hung between the ship and quay—a safety net must be fixed. The men at the winches could not see into the hold—very well, there must be a man to give signals and there must be another below to relay the signal above. All according to regulations. Paragraph so-and-so.

The captain paced between the boats with angry agitated steps.

Now work could begin.

The winches at hatches one and two began to rattle and No. 4 dared hold back no longer. Glen and Antonio whirled their lever round (after first binding the handles carefully with wood and rag against the time when the iron would get hot) and then slowly lowered the heavy hook on the plaited steel runner into the dark square hatchway.

The two signal men, each armed with a whistle, took command of operations. "Stop" and "Heave

BITTER WATERS

away" and "Poco mas" and "Stop. 'Vast heaving slow" they whistled. And in time the hook finally descended.

Below, the first case had been made clear and fixed in the slings with care and circumspection. The hook was fixed to the sling and the signal man below piped "Heave easy." Glen and Antonio heard him plainly. The hatch was like a sounding board. They heard him plainly but nevertheless they had to wait until the signal man above grasped the situation and repeated the command with waving hands and shrilling whistle.

"Stop—stop—stop." The case swung on the long cable, swung gently to and fro just clear of the ground. One of the four picked up a heavy bar and swung it lustily at the slings where they converged on the hook. The slings must sit properly so that the case would not slip.

After plenty of "Stop" and "Heave easy" a very miniature case saw daylight. Glen and Antonio forgot exactly what was to be done now and hauled, hands laid mightily on the lever, hauled until the case rattled to the big gin blocks of the derrick.

"Hallo up there—it won't go further." After

BITTER WATERS

a little argument whether it should be tipped right or left of the hatch it finally arrived, and as the brakes were so bad faster than it ought, crashing on the iron deck plates.

Stevedores usually haul up five and six cases at a time—this furious lust for work it is that causes all the accidents.

Carefully—easily—the company won't pay for broken necks.

Time passed. It grew hotter. The men at the winches took off a quarter of an hour to sling straw matting above their heads to shield them from the sun.

"Eight bells. Eight bells. Eight bells." The cry came down and down the ship's length. The case in process of being hauled, rattled back into the depths as though the winch were afflicted by sudden faintness.

Midday. After their meal the crew lay as usual on the fo'c'sle head, arms crossed under their heads and eyes closed. But they did not sleep. They were merry and jocular. They had to force themselves to lie at rest. They wanted to jump about and wrestle and play pranks. They felt a

BITTER WATERS

fine comradeship and solidarity in the common joy that burned in their veins and bodies.

Sabotage!

The captain had seen it clearly. He had telephoned for the agent and now both men paced the boat deck and watched the "work." They saw it clearly—but what was there to see?

Everything proceeded in accordance with regulations. Even seamen can only break their necks once.

Glen felt again in good trim. He had already forgotten the night's events. With every adventurous instinct aroused he was now heart and soul in the "work."

"This afternoon we'll finish it." At midday hatches one and two and four and five had swapped and pooled experiences and hit upon a common plan.

An order can be executed either one way or the other. The men at the winches could not see what was going on below—and the winches worked badly. You couldn't rely on the old ironmongery.

The men below must inspect every case very carefully, especially for the word "fragile." A case marked "Fragile" and "Handle with care"

BITTER WATERS

must be hauled up with every attention. That is to say when it was clear of the ground it must be given a hearty push so that it would swing backwards and forwards ten yards out of the perpendicular. And the case would not swing the less when the runner began to wind and the case swayed upwards.

Then the signal men must be at their posts: the hatchway is far smaller than the hold itself and if a swinging case should jam under the hatchway—

It happened; the men at the winches felt it. The derrick shivered and the runner tautened stiffly. The case crashed against the hatchway. The men below had seen the mishap coming and had long since taken shelter. And what remained of the case fell like hail, softly or heavily according to contents, back to the bottom of the hold.

What was that? Electric lamps!

And that? Knives and scissors from Solingen!

—Who can help an accident now and then!

Towards four in the afternoon the men below in No. 4 came to the case of fireworks. Mexico is a country that consumes a tremendous amount of fireworks.

BITTER WATERS

There were fireworks of first-class quality. The crew of the "Hispaniola" can give testimony on this point for, as the case crashed against the hatchway, part of the contents exploded in the air and the remainder on the iron flooring below.

Glen and Antonio loosed their winches and the runners paid out like plunging snakes. It was the finest firework display there ever was, with stars and rockets soaring to the skies.

A minute later the "Hispaniola's" big bell sounded the fire alarm. The men clambered out of No. 4 a little hastily, slightly singed but otherwise uninjured. It smoked a little and for a while a seawater hose played in the hatch. Work was through for the day.

"The blackguards will blow the ship up under my feet," said the captain.

In the evening nearly the whole of the crew had gathered in the fo'c'sle. Emissaries from the striking Mexican dockers had arrived and expressed their thanks and admiration for the revolutionary doings of the seamen. Men from other ships who had seen or heard the explosion came aboard the "Hispaniola" in little groups and their merriment masked a certain curiosity. They brought their

BITTER WATERS

own spokesmen as seamen are seldom linguists. The spokesmen are a kind of institution like authorised interpreters and conduct negotiations between crews and masters. They began to deliver felicitations of authentic diplomatic flavour to the "Hispaniola" spokesmen. Then reserve and caution vanished, the men themselves spoke warmly and with animation and even the taciturn took their pipes from their mouths and talked. They swapped tobaccos as a sign of friendship. The stokers filled a big tea can with Spanish wine sweetened with sugar. The atmosphere became that of a successful revolution. They swapped yarns in groups, shouted each other down, boasted and yelled catcalls through their cupped palms towards the bridge. Again and again they broke into roars of mighty laughter. They began to sing the Internationale and two trimmers hoisted a red blanket to a lamp standard. But in the meantime it had grown so dark that it could not be seen from the bridge. The few who lay outstretched on their biscuits round the anchor windlass could find no rest. Hell's delight was fiddled on deck, tin lids clashed like cymbals and the stokers clattered on the iron deck with noisy wooden slippers to create

BITTER WATERS

pandemonium. The small yellow flames of matches spread over the palms of big hands and licked brown faces. When pipes were lit anew sparks shone across the deck into the blue dry night above Tampico.

A white drill jacket moved to and fro above the brown teak bridge rail. From time to time as the laughter rose threateningly the figure stopped and gazed down upon the moving light points of pipes and cigarettes. It was the first officer. Behind the bridge the captain and agent sat face to face in basket chairs. They had telephoned the authorities and cabled to Europe. They awaited instructions.

Able Seaman Glen sat on the starboard rail of the fo'c'sle head. His feet were curled around the lowest iron cross bar and he held a tin can filled with wine between his thighs. He talked to an old man, a German, who had turned mendicant in Mexico and who came aboard for food. The German consul had offered him a free passage to Germany but the old man refused it, saying he had been too long abroad now to re-learn his native ways. Glen marvelled at the answer and offered the old man a cigarette, an American cigarette

BITTER WATERS

from a silver paper packet. The packet was empty. Glen slid from the rail. He must get another packet from his bunk.

Away from the deck it was silent; none of the crew were below. He could hear their noise in the fo'c'sle. The alleyways were like hollow bowels and against them blubbered the waters of the Rio Panuco. He whistled and beat his clenched fists against the iron bulkheads. As he went along he thought again of the parakeet, he had forgotten it during the evening. As soon as he had put it inside the box the tiny creature had begun to gnaw angrily at the wooden bars. Maybe it had gnawed them through and hidden away. He crossed the high iron step in one long stride and the door crashed against the bulkhead.

A light burned—someone left the light burning, he thought.

Someone sat in his bunk. He rubbed his eyes. A stranger. A woman. She sat there, in the third bunk up on the right hand side, the girl he had slept with the night before. He stood stock still.

"What are you doing here?"

As he entered she had cowered instinctively in the shadow of the bunk so that he could get no

BITTER WATERS

proper glimpse of her. Her eyes shone fear-filled in the darkness. She even drew up her legs hanging over the bunk-edge as though to guard against assault. She held her hand, one finger outstretched, across her breast. Glen saw the green bird, the parakeet, perched on the finger. She made no reply. He saw she was afraid and it gave him courage. He went towards her, but did not know what he should say. The first of them no longer able to bear the silence of the dark, hot fo'c'sle was the parakeet. He rubbed his tiny black horny tongue along the girl's tense brown finger. He fixed his tiny claws firmly in her flesh, preened himself, threw up his beak and shrilled his war-cry: "Cocorita, cocorita, cocorita, gurry, gurry, ay, ay, ay—Parakeet."

One thing was immediately clear to him: she had come because of the parakeet. But how had she found her way here? How did she know his ship? How had she come aboard? There was a watch on the gangway or should have been! How had she found his bunk and the parakeet? Perhaps the little beast had screeched and she had heard its call. Few parakeets can talk. What did

BITTER WATERS

she think of it all? Did she think to recover it by force? Was she so fond of it that she would risk everything for its sake? If that were so his theft became serious. He had done her a great injury. But because no man is willing to admit his own misdeeds unconsciously he began to seek some reason that would justify it. "Ach!" he thought. "The girl knows all about ships, her sort know their way about. God knows how often she's been passed from bunk to bunk here already." What the truth of the matter was he never learned. He was never rid of the torture of this uncertainty for she never spoke. He accepted this or the other explanation, according to his mood and sometimes he almost welcomed one that at other times made him redden with shame.

But on this evening when her eyes shone upon him like stars—they did shine like stars, as a fact—he believed her eyes for they were eloquent. They had an answer for everything that he asked even in the German she did not understand. They looked him squarely in the face and they asked: "You stole my bird?" He spoke excusingly, he lied. "Ach, look here, that was only a joke of

BITTER WATERS

mine." The eyes remained stern and disapproving: "You stole my bird!" He said: "Don't be angry. I wanted a little keepsake, I thought nothing of it." The eyes said: "I knew you would steal him. You liked him. I am not angry any more but you understand that I have come to take him home. You see how I love him."

Glen said: "Now look here, my dear, you ought to be thankful I'm decent; another in my place might . . ."

The eyes said: "I'm afraid of the angry face you make. You could kill me. Perhaps you will take the bird and kill it because you are angry with me."

She pressed her finger with the parakeet still closer to her breast. Glen said: "Now then, don't start to cry, you've no need to be afraid of me."

The eyes said: "I'm not afraid any more. You are a good man and you will give me back my bird."

Suddenly a voice bellowed down the ventilator and a fist beat against the hollow tin: "Hey, below there, come up, man!"

The girl shrank back; the ship was a place of

BITTER WATERS

ghosts. She must have had some pluck ever to come aboard.

"Come," said Glen.

They stole away. She understood instinctively and her face lightened. It was a triumph. She had her bird again; it was unusual for anyone to return the thing they stole, it was unusual for a seaman to creep away from his shipmates. It was a sign.

They went softly, on tip-toe, although it was unnecessary. They glided along the long iron bulkheads of the alleyway and skirted the light pools of the lamps. The girl kept close behind his back. She was pale with excitement.

During the night he learned her name was Chiquita.

This trip, the "Hispaniola's" sixty-seventh to Mexico, she lay a week longer than usual in Tampico dock. The dock strike interfered with the time-table. The strained relations between officers and crew were only eased after the partial satisfaction of the dockers' demands.

The week's enforced stay gave the crew ample

BITTER WATERS

opportunity for shore-going. The crew had money; the company paid overtime to hasten unloading. This brought bad luck and misfortune to many of the crew. Many contracted venereal diseases. They hid it as well as possible for none of them wanted a spell in a Mexican hospital. It was better in Hamburg and anyhow once at sea they could report sick and be treated by the ship's doctor.

The others who did not go to the brothels, wanted to be home with their wives.

Thus the desire for the homeward voyage was shared by all the crew.

Every evening Glen promenaded with Chiquita in the Corso. A military band played in the pavilion in the large square's centre. Under the awnings of the bare cafés the soldiers drank Montezuma beer. The statues of the generals and presidents fallen into disfavour since the last Revolution lay in fragments about their pedestals. Overladen motor buses rattled along the narrow asphalt that crossed the square. They stopped at the corner where the compressed air stations lay to have their hissing tyres inflated. In the bar-

BITTER WATERS

racks trumpeters blew "Tattoo." The fires of itinerant kitchens flickered in the dockside alleys. Naked, brown feet fell noiselessly in the thick dust. White dresses gleamed. Many went in and out of a postoffice and watched curiously how their letters slid from the pillar box mouth down glass tubes to the officials' hands. Pedlars squatted under the spattered wall of an old church with tin ware, clay pottery, white parrots and flowers whose odours almost stupefied. Through the open latticed walls of the cinema could be seen the spectators' legs rising serried to the roof and the electric bell announced the beginning of the performance without ceasing throughout the night. The parade circled about the pavilion like a weary slow millstone. The girls moved and swayed like flowers, and their eyes gleamed as eyes only gleam in the first bloom of life. The old women shuffled watchfully in their rear. The old woman who chaperoned Chiquita ambled in the twain's track. She enacted an almost wordless ceremonial, and Spanish in its strictness of observance. Lacking entirely any tie of blood she felt nevertheless as a mother to Chiquita and allotted Glen the rôle of shy but ardent lover. She pulled faces as

BITTER WATERS

though insulted when Glen called her an "old trollop," as though she understood the word. Perhaps she did understand.

Anyone with a difficult problem to decide listens gladly to the opinion of others when this can be done without any loss of personal dignity. In Glen's case it could be done. The crew discussed the problem in the fo'c'sle every day. Although he knew every word of the argument by heart, nevertheless he always listened when the married and unmarried argued for their relative states.

"Marry a whore and you get the best wife. The girls are faithful. They don't want any more men. They've had enough to last 'em a life-time. Don't think that the other women a seaman can marry aren't whores too. They go loose, when you're at sea. Don't blame 'em—we do the same. To be married and go to sea is nothing for any man. You get nothing that a wife should give; all you get is paying out money, sending your allotment, three quarters of your pay. And then she can't live on it and has to go out working. It's time for any seafaring man to quit the sea when he marries. A seaman's life leads nowhere."

BITTER WATERS

In the midday break that followed the meal when they lay on deck in the shade of the overhanging bulwarks, or curled up on some hatch cover that was fairly clean and when the old hands sat on the bench leaning against the bulkhead and chatting and smoking, Glen lay alone. He lay on the fo'c'slehead, his head in the shadow of the bulwarks. His hands were crossed under his head and he watched the clouds as they swam slowly through the derricks and he calculated:

"In Hamburg I have seven months' pay still to draw; that makes seven times twenty-nine marks. Add to that a hundred and thirty hours overtime; makes hundred and thirty times one mark fifty . . . take away taxes. A second steerage class passage to Hamburg costs two hundred and eighty marks. If I go and speak with the chief purser I may get it cheaper. I'll go to him to-day. I must, I told Chiquita I'd see her a little later to-day. But she'll still be waiting on the quay!"

Glen sighed. The pressure in his stomach was easier when he stood upright. He went to where the others lay.

BITTER WATERS

At two bells—one o'clock—to the next four bells—six o'clock in the afternoon—Glen stood as tally clerk in the dark 'tween deck of No. 4 hatch. A tally clerk has a pencil and paper. He notes the marks and numbers of the cases unloaded by the stevedores. He is responsible that none of the cargo is stolen. It is not an easy job in Mexico.

Glen cursed the reputation for reliability that had pushed him into the No. 4 hatch job. The general cargo was stored in No. 4. He was not without experience in the ways of dockers but these were a gang of bandits. Tally clerks are given a revolver on the job but the stevedores had them as well and their fingers were just as loose on a trigger as they were quick on a knife.

The air was thick with dust. It swirled like stardust in the blinding light that poured down the narrow shaft but in the corners it was so dark that the dockers' eyes sparkled. Glen walked in a circle and counted them. "I have eight. Eight men and as soon as my eyes aren't on the lot there's something afoot. There's one sitting on a case. He might be sleeping but actually he's got a crow-

BITTER WATERS

bar behind his back and is forcing open the lid. I'll have a look."

Naturally! the blighters run and shout and create an artificial disturbance and in the meantime up goes the case.

Adieu, case! Now they're plundering it above.

Again and again he wiped the sweat from his eyes. Blobs of sweat splashed on the paper. Small, cooling rivulets of sweat ran incessantly down his breast and back into his pants, furrowing the dust-caked skin. His dirty white overalls were grey with dank sweaty dust. From time to time the bos'un's bullet head thrust over the hatchway edge to see how the work was going on. Every time it appeared Glen barked through the rattle of the winches: "Bos'un!" But the bos'un waved his fingers and disappeared. He knew already what Glen had to say. He knew himself how they were stealing and thieving.

But the tally clerk is responsible in any case.

After supper Glen went, washed and changed, to the chief purser. He was nervous. So much depended on the purser's mood and temper. And

even if all turned out well—still he felt nervous. It meant so much to him.

The purser sat behind his counter on a bench upholstered in red velvet and slept. He slept upright in the easy doze of age. Glen saw his plumpish, eagle-like profile as he nodded his head towards the guichet. He saw how the old man slept, his crossed arms pillowed in the soft cushion of his belly. He was a big man on the ship. He lunched every day with the captain.

Again Glen felt the agonising pressure in his stomach. Fear.

Should he knock or not?

He waited a few minutes but still the old man slept, rigid and silent as a wax work.

Glen knew it was dangerous to wake the purser but it was still more dangerous not to wake him. At any moment someone might come on an errand to the office and Glen desired none to witness his business with the old man.

For a moment his hand hung indecisively in the air before the door.

Then he knocked.

BITTER WATERS

Able Seaman Glen was on the second watch, the watch from twelve to four midnight and midday. It is the worst of the watches. Midday it means going straight to work with a full stomach, and bad, interrupted sleep at night; awakening at midnight after scarcely sleeping and again at seven when breakfast is up.

The "Hispaniola" had put to sea at midday. It was now ten minutes before midnight and the bell on the bridge struck one. Glen flung the good cap he had just been wearing on deck under his bunk and began to change. His watch clothes were an old field grey tunic that he tucked in blue slops so that it looked like a thick shirt with a high stiff collar. He slipped cigarette papers and tobacco in his pocket, put on the old worn cap which ever since he owned it had lacked peak and the company's badge and went to the alleyway. His watch mates were leaning against the bulkhead waiting for the bos'un. They wore sea boots, oil skin aprons and had their sleeves rolled high. They were due for deck swabbing. All were weary and yet each felt a thrill of expectancy; it was the first watch on the homebound voyage. Eight bells

struck. The bos'un left his cabin and said quickly, "We have bad luck again." Glen had to serve the first hour of the watch in the foremast look-out. He liked this hour: it meant time for reflection in undisturbed solitude. You sat high above the ship's burden of humanity, hidden in a nest. A heavy wind was blowing and in the wind you could feel the ship was leaving tropic waters. He climbed the ladder to the crow's nest. He pressed his legs against the nest edge, and felt the swaying and heavy rolling of the ship with satisfaction. The mast trembled and each heavy wave smashed a Samson-post groaning against its hollow steel shaft. Before and below him the sharp steel prow ran vertical and trembling through the sea. The sea lay still, a dark landscape of hill and dale, seemingly motionless. It was peculiar how immobile these dark hills lay before the keen prow's thrust and how in the next second a white foaming hissing cataract arose, boiling and bubbling in a swirling stream along the ship's sides. White harsh-sounding foam, exploded water, an upright barrier of water explosions stood ever erect before the running prow. The great ship coursed the seas in which it lay deep bedded; it smashed the ele-

BITTER WATERS

ment that bore its mass, ground it flat and left behind a broad track of crushed and conquered waters, a trail against which the sea waves broke. Great luminous patches, "water-eyes" Glen had christened them, swirled in the foam swathes along the ship's flanks. Microbes, communities of infinitesimal creatures which gave forth light. Sometimes they flowed from the leather hose-pipes when the men swilled the promenade deck at night and then they ended life under the piassava brooms.

Glen was deep in thought; he was happy. He gave little heed to the horizon towards which the great ship sped, but stared at the moonlit heaven with its streamers of scudding cloud and from sheer carelessness hailed a star just risen from the horizon. An hour ago he had escorted Chiquita to her cabin alleyway. For two hours he had sat there below with her, at the furthest point for'ard, in the shelter of the ventilators. He had feared for her when she leaned too far out over the rails. He had gripped tightly the loose folds of her dress in his fist but he did it so that she did not know he held her. The bows swung over the sea, groaning in every plate, and smashed in the sea like a

monstrous hammer. The ship worked. The bow rose, rose like a bird that unfurls its wings against the wind and quicker than a bird, it rose like a slack sail under a sudden gust; it rose ten yards, twelve yards high and took your guts up with it and thrust them up in your throat; and were the neck not so narrow, you would have spewed them out. The bow stood erect in the air for a second only, swaying and trembling like the body of an old airplane. Then it swung in a downward glide, plunging as though there could be no halt, and Chiquita's little body was nearly flung aloft by the pressure of the air masses that blew out her clothes like a mighty pump. She was a remarkable girl, without fear. She was not seasick even once.

Glen was proud of her. He was proud of the sea, and proud of the ship, proud that both should shew her their finest form. He was even able to shew her the dolphin hunt. A hunting ship is a marvellous sight. The dolphins sleep at night on the water and as their hearing is not acute they first become aware of the ship's tumultuous nearness when its great mass overtowers them. They awake in wild, blind panic. They give a mighty

BITTER WATERS

leap forward from the midst of shattered sleep, away from the prow that bears down on them with the speed of a train. Their broad bodies hang flying a second-long in the air and they fly no faster than the ship and in the same direction and so high that you can grip the tail that dangles over the rails. Their bellies gleam white over the bubbling foam and a veil of spray floats behind them. Then the pointed heads turn downwards to the sea, the back curves and, drawing a trail of white bubbles with them under water, they dart away faster than a torpedo, tacking sharply like merchantmen when attacked by torpedo-boats in time of war. They split the seas like silver lightning, hugging the bows and hypnotised by its swirl of cleft waters like a hare in the headlights of a lorry. Not until they have fled for miles do they turn aside from the ship's course. In some waters a ship hunts hundreds in an hour. Chiquita became weary of the sight.

This day was the proudest in Glen's life, one of these great moments that a man stores and treasures among all his memories and one to which he returns again and again. As the "Hispiandola" was about to sail he had given up all hope. The

thousand streamers, the gay paper ribbons, that those on deck and shore threw each to the other as though to bind the ship to land, were already snapping. The gangway was raised and the winches groaned and snarled as they hauled in the ropes. The pilot's whistle shrilled and the Mexican Government tug boat took the ship in tow. Glen stood embittered at the rails amidships, hands thrust in his pockets. He let the others work and worried about nothing. "She's got the ticket," he thought, "and now she'll be running to the agent to sell it back. The women will laugh at me for a fool." The cries of farewell rolled like a wave between ship and quay, ridden by the last wails of the sirens.

Suddenly she was there and God knows where she sprang from; she stood quiet and motionless on the quay as though the sailing was no concern of hers. She did not hurry. Behind her she trailed an old American tin trunk and on an outstretched finger of her free hand gleamed a turquoise gem, the parakeet. She looked like Robinson Crusoe. They had seen her for'ard, the derricks were lowered and still hung over the quay, a couple of dockers hung the trunk on the hook

BITTER WATERS

and the man on deck hauled it aboard. Glen ran for'ard through the passengers. The "Hispiandola" was moving faster along the quay and any second now the gap between ship and shore would be too wide to bridge. The girl stood close beneath the side. She stretched up her arm and with a touching confident gesture she passed the parakeet to Glen's thick finger. The next second and the strong arms of the second bos'un had lifted her frail body over the rails with a single swing. Up on the bridge the captain turned to the pilot: "Silly bitch wants a trip to Europe and turns up late."

Two bells. The small brass bell tinkled thinly from the bridge as though it were far away, as though it came from the church tower of a hamlet at the end of an endless, dusty lane. Glen felt for the thick bell rope above his head and repeated the brass's tinkle in the dull reverberation of the bronze bell. He looked around; the smoke of the funnels waved like a mighty plume across the bright sky. The broad curved breast of the bridge lay below him, braced against the great wind and behind on the boat deck swung the double

chain of life boats and each time as a wide swell rolled under the "Hispaniola's" keel a shiver trembled down the length of the tall mast; the screws whirled clear of the sea. Glen opened the trap door of the nest and clambered down.

He had now to go to the engine room and read off the figures on the engine room dials. Every four hours they are written down on the black slate on the bridge. He climbed over the bulwarks and, blinded by the cabin lights, groped his way along the anchor windlass steam pipe until he came to the companionway that led to the main deck. He went to the engine room. It was warm in the alleyway, a beautiful warmth that made him drowsy. He went through the engine room door and looked into the white depths, criss-crossed by the iron bars of the gratings. Glen gripped the oily rails with both hands and slid down. The pulsation of the engines closed over him and the room trembled and the gleaming pistons thrust upwards like lightning from the depths. An even greater heat welled out from the boilers and the hot desiccated air made him deaf. Glen yawned and would have liked to stretch himself along the warm gratings and sleep. He slid down from

BITTER WATERS

rung to rung almost without using his feet, his arms thrust stiffly against the rails. The boilers loomed like towers above him and the room shook with the mighty labour of masses of driven steel. The wheels and pistons gleamed yellow, dripping with oil. In front of the engines against the rails, huddled the greasers, their bodies motionless above their straddled legs and from the oil cans clutched in their sure hands long yellow strands drooped to the quivering joints. The oil cans swayed to the beat of the rise and fall of the steel masses. Greasers must stand squarely on their feet and their hands dare not tremble; theirs is a dangerous job in dirty weather. Arrived at the bottom he stumbled forward to the engine room switchboard. The engineer of the watch stood at the desk against the stokehold bulkhead. With one eye he read a newspaper and with the other glimpsed the round dials of the manometer and the engine room telegraph. Both men nodded; men are always polite when they have no professional contacts. Glen read the revolutions. Port engine 67.5. Starboard 66.3. He turned, repeating the figures in his head, and climbed the ladder again.

He climbed the ladder that hung like a fire escape at the back of the cabins.

The lights of the promenade deck still burned as he reached the first platform. The smoke room windows were closed and in the conservatory the piano next to the bare orchestra dais was covered with sailcloth. The basket chairs were huddled pell-mell and were still dripping seawater from the deck swabbing. The wet deck planks curved gently for'ard as at the bend of a cycle track; it was like a cheerless, deserted street, white, and shaped like a child's coffin. A man, felt slippered, trod the deck noiselessly and the lamps threw his shadow across the planks' gleaming wetness; he carried a brush in his hand and a paint pot slung from a big hook at the hips. He was a painter. He effaced the print of dirty fingers on the white enamel of the cabins with quick-drying paint. Glen stood for a moment before the box where the latest telegrams were pasted. It held cables from a German news agency, non-political, international and so colourlessly stereotyped as to be almost without meaning.

The boat deck lay one deck higher and here the wandering city of the decks below had its end

and the ship began. Wind snarled through the serried life boats. The heavy pockwood blocks of the tackle creaked. The skylight of the engine room was open and yellow, dark, uncanny light flowed from the portholes of the decks and thin steam wisps and oil stench wavered through the apertures. A fine rain of rust sprayed from the smoke stack. Here above lay the officers' cabins and the captain's quarters and for'ard the great bridge bounded the boat deck. All structures on the boat deck were of brown teak and wooden gratings lay on the planks of the narrow gangways between the cabins and the boats. The bridge was like a huge veranda almost entirely cased with glass. Summer and winter the ship's course was laid in the closed wheel-house, cut off with a heavy glass sliding door from the open ends of the bridge. Behind the bridge lay the chart-house and pilot's cabin.

Gradually Glen's eyes again became accustomed to the darkness. His hand felt for the knob of the sliding door. It slid back on its rollers with a faint shriek and blackness gaped. "Sh-h-s-h-h," hissed a voice. Every night it was the same, you dared only speak in whispers on the bridge, walk

tip-toe and avoid the slightest noise because the captain slept behind the bridge. The almost utter darkness, heavily shaded lights, whispering, the faint squeak of boots, the creak of the steering gear and the faint groan of teak in the ship's rolling made the room uncanny. Behind the glass pane Glen saw the shadows of the second and fourth officers, one short and fat, the other long and thin, silhouetted against the blue night. Their faces seemed so hidden in their high uniform collars that head and neck rose from the shoulders like a tube.

Glen, still dazzled by the lamps of the promenade deck, felt along the bridge rails. Next to the case where the sea glasses hung, he touched the shield of a small, darkened lamp that hung above a black slate. Crouching, he scribbled the engine revolutions in white chalk. The second officer always stood at his side when he did this; the second officer had no interest in the figures, but was urged by a deep-rooted suspicion that writing was beyond the powers of an ordinary A.B.

He himself was born on a schooner and had learned to write late in life. All officers on big liners are nagging, fussy and punctilious from

sheer lack of distraction and occupation. They abjure intercourse with the crew on account of their higher rank and are not permitted to talk to the passengers. Constipation, boredom and mutual antipathy make them cantankerous. They are petty bourgeois, coffee-drinking, sea-going petty bourgeois.

Glen went to the helm to relieve his watch mate. In the pale gleam of the compass lamp his face was as peaceful as a dreaming child. He did not look up but, one hand still holding a spoke, he stepped aside and Glen took his stance on the coconut matting before the helm. Glen stroked his finger tips along the smooth spokes to feel his way into the ship's will, to learn her present mood. The liner lay quiet in her course; she had no whim that drove her from her course. He was calm now. Always when he took over the helm he felt a faint inner surge of excitement—it was as though he suddenly bestrode an enormous animal. The ship feels immediately when another strides her. She alters her gait and answers plainly to the hand that steers her, to each man's hand. It sometimes happens that even when she is apparently following an even course, there is a mighty, in-

visible struggle being waged between herself and the helmsman. The ship has an urge in her to buck, to leave her course, to change her gait and the man at the helm must struggle against her and strain every nerve to hold her in check, quieten her, to gain the upper hand of the great and apparently docile creature.

Steering is a queer affair. Many can never learn it rightly. You can steer with your brain; reflect, this way the wind lies and so blows the sea; the compass reads so-and-so, therefore the helm must turn this way or that. But he who calculates will never steer well. All mechanical contrivances are useless. Only the man who steers with his nerves, with his sensibilities, can ever hope to steer well. In the tropics it is best done bare-foot. The naked feet feel the ship's will and meet it with a half or quarter turn of the helm. This instinctive sensibility is blunted somewhat by the steam engine that moves the rudder, but nevertheless a good ship in harmony with her helmsman can hold an even course for a quarter of an hour. Then the repressed plungings in the great body become too urgent; they break through and the ship moves one, two points from her

BITTER WATERS

course and then returns like an old man who remembers he has taken a wrong road. You can steer by some star or other that lies in the course. You can fix it by the mast or tackle and then the compass need not be watched for a time, but not too long, for the stars wander and suddenly the ship is out of her course. You must have the feel of the ship in you and clock time as well. Exactly half an hour had passed when Glen, driven by impulse, peeped through the spyhole in the illuminated chart-house to where a chronometer hung. Time to ring the bell. An hour later he was relieved. It was time to make coffee. The "Hispaniola" officers had arranged a light snack for the mid-watch between two and three, more from boredom and to shorten the watch spell than from real hunger.

Glen went down to the main deck. The alleyway on the lee side was warm and smelled of hot swabbing and fresh baked rolls. All the bakers were at work. Sweat drops pearly on their fleshy faces, red from the heat of the electric ovens. The big wooden rollers plunged in the dough and squelched it into thick white cloths. The first new rolls lay in round baskets, brown, hot and

crackling with crispness. Glen swapped eight rolls for the latest news from the bridge—how many miles the ship had covered in the last twenty-four hours, when she was due in Vigo and when in the Channel. Glen carried the rolls between two soup plates up to the promenade deck. The first-class night steward squatted on a coco mat in his pantry and cleaned the passengers' shoes. His eyes were red with weariness and sleep lay so deep in his throat that he could scarcely speak. He flung a thumb over his shoulder and pointed to a pile of sandwiches left over from the smoke room the night before, which lay knotted in a napkin. Glen nodded and took the knotted napkin between his teeth and mounted again to the officers' steward's pantry. A light burned there as always; the stokers had been there already and thieved the coffee spoons. Every night the same thing happened although the stokers knew the steward would reclaim them the same day. But the spoons were finer than those issued to the crew so they thieved them again and again. The pantry was so small that a man could not have lain full length on the floor. A couple of plates stood on a buffet and cans and cups hung from the hooks on the

BITTER WATERS

ceiling above. A nickel kettle was fixed to the wall, fed by a steam tubing, and a water tap, from which dripped a thin trickle of fresh water, was so fixed in the corner that the kettle could not be filled directly. The fixture was intended to avoid any waste of fresh water. It was a nuisance and awkward for the steward and he revenged himself by letting the fresh water run uselessly night and day.

Glen filled the nickel kettle and turned on the steam. The steam bubbled and dulled the water; all water on board is heated by steam. He went along to the fourth officer's cabin. A light burned. Glen threw a fleeting glance at the disordered bunk above which hung a coloured print, "Birches at Sunset," and took the cup of freshly ground coffee, the saucer with the butter and the tin of condensed milk from the little table. The steward kept them in the fourth officer's cabin so they could not be stolen from the pantry.

The water was boiling. Glen shook the coffee in a tin litre measure and brewed it. While the coffee drew he smeared the rolls with butter; they were still so hot that the butter melted and soaked into the bread. He poured the coffee into the

white can through a sieve and gathered up the breakfast. The rolls he carried between two plates stuck in the breast of his tunic, cups and spoons were in one pocket and condensed milk in the other. He took the coffee pot in his hand and the sandwiches between his teeth, and one hand remained free to open and close doors.

This time the glass sliding door on the bridge opened softly and carefully at his step. The officers of the watch had listened for his coming. Blinded by the sudden gloom Glen felt for the card table and laid cups and plates on the pile of nautical books. Their greediness filled him with both rage and satisfaction. He felt as a peasant does when his pig feeds well and heartily.

He went to the helm and relieved his watch mate. The other disappeared for an half hour's sleep in the mess-room. From three o'clock onwards he had to waken first the coffee cook, the first-class stewards and then the bos'un and men of the second watch who relieved at four.

Again he felt the peace of the ship enfold him, the rhythm of the sixty-six tiny pulse-beats that every minute drove her forward. It was a clear

BITTER WATERS

night and starry and heavy with the warm air of the tropics. He did not look at the yellow compass dial with its circles of swimming figures. He steered the "Hispaniola" by a star, by a small and twinkling star that hung for'ard between the swaying ratlines of the rigging.



CHAPTER IV

Log of the "Hispaniola":

April 17th. Longitude . . Min. . . Secs. . .

Latitude . . . Min. . . Secs. . .

Watch reported 8.03. Windstrength: 7, clear, starry night. Port engine 67.5. Starboard engine 66.3. Temperature: Water 23.7. Air 20.9. Course .273. Third Officer, Langheinrichs.

11.44. Cry aft Man overboard, 11.45. Both engines stop. 11.46. Helm hard starboard. Order to lower the motor boat on the starboard side. 11.47. Captain took command of ship.

The next morning two varying rumours were current as to the girl's accident or attempted suicide. The passengers, none of whom really knew, said it was a love affair—she had been seen with one of the crew. Before the mast among the crew and especially among the stokers it was held that the captain was responsible for the whole business because he had ordered the girl's little

bird to be slung overboard. Of two possible explanations stokers always choose the more romantic.

Both were false. Perhaps—and it is not a thing you say easily—perhaps the captain had driven the girl's deep secret worry to the verge of the act. The little bird which perched all day long on her shoulder or in her hair knew nothing at all of the captain's afternoon nap and even at two o'clock in the afternoon uttered his small but piercing cry: "Lorita, Cocorita, Gurry, Gurry, ay, ay, ay!" And once it awakened the captain. He rang for the steward: "Tell that Spanish bitch if her damned sparrow yells like that again, I'll have it slung overboard." The steward took pains to deliver this communication as forcibly as circumstances allowed.

Hers was a complicated unhappiness: an unhappiness that crushed her heart. It had its being in the excitement of all the strange things that now went on about her. As she came aboard her whole body had trembled but she had let none remark it. There had been trouble with the old woman she had left behind, with the authorities, with the customs and she had endured it all with

that same stoicism that had made her way of life bearable. Such a nerve-storm in so frail a body had to find an outlet. In favourable circumstances it might have spelled joy or even happiness. But in the enormous dimensions of the strange life of a liner it ended in great depression. She had suffered slights and these made her sad and her helplessness in her sadness made her the object of still greater insult. Above all it was the women who, guided by sure instinct, could not abide the girl. Their hard stinging words robbed her of pride and confidence. She hid it. She sought a place where she could be alone and weep. But she could find no place. Lack of solitude is one of the worst features in life on a big liner. At night she avoided going to bed in order to be alone. Her conscience began to torture her. The words of the women awoke in her the first consciousness of "shame." For the first time in her life her thoughts, the children of her own brain, took sides against her. But there was something else; there were the fearful dreams that afflict the women of the terrible profession she had followed. And when on this afternoon the captain threatened

BITTER WATERS

to have her bird, the little green bird she loved, thrown overboard, it was really only the drop that made her cup of sorrow brim over.

At midday on the same day Able Seaman Glen came off watch. He sat drinking coffee with his mates in the seamen's mess. Two stokers had laid up again. They belonged to the eight to twelve watch. At ten o'clock the one, and a half an hour later the other had flung the shovel in the corner; it was no use, they were finished. One man with venereal disease; the other, drunk, had kicked off his wooden slippers and trampled in the live coals. At eleven o'clock both were in sick bay. The Third Engineer reported to the First and the First spoke with the Captain. Now the bos'un came to the mess and asked for an A.B. to volunteer for the bunkers. The ship must sail her knots. One of the sick stokers had been replaced by a trimmer of the same watch, and now the trimmer's place must be filled by a man from the deck.

Glen volunteered. He volunteered because the work counted as overtime. He needed money. He went red in the face as he told the bos'un; now

they all knew he was going to marry when the ship touched Hamburg. No one ever volunteers for the stokehold of his own free will.

The new work meant that Glen started his watch at eight instead of midnight. As he was very tired he went to his bunk immediately. He knew that he would be wakened at seven for supper. He was not wakened; they forgot. The stokers only remembered a few minutes before the time for the third watch that a deckhand had turned trimmer.

So it came about that Glen did not see Chiquita before he went on watch.

Down to the stokehold. Man followed man between hot, soot encrusted pipes, ever warmer, ever hotter and then only hot. Below, the shovels scraped harshly on the pitted iron plates. A wave of scorched air and coal gas drenched the half-naked bodies. The old watch huddled under the ventilator, white-eyed, black and sweating. The new watch took the shovels from their hands and the muscles swelled on their arms. In two minutes, Glen, unused to the work, was dripping with sweat. The watch sliced slag and smashed it with hammers; and the slag was driven in the

sea with water pressure. This swallowed the first fifteen minutes. Glen had no time to think or feel other than that he kept the time and measure of the work.

Ready. Wipe the sweat out of your eyes. Calm the heart. A swig of water.

Now the trimmers crept up the tunnels that lead to the bunkers. Big low rooms, black as night, aswirl with coal dust, half empty on the home-bound voyage. A small cable lamp swung from the roof, dark and thick with rust. There were shafts in the floor and the shafts opened into the stokehold. They were empty. A trimmer has to fill a shaft with coal in three hours, 110, 120, 130 barrow loads of coal reckoning thirty shovels to the barrow. The trimmers have good times and bad times. In good times, when the bunkers are full, the coal slides like an avalanche into the shaft under its own weight. But when the bunkers are empty and the coal lies far away against the bulkheads and the seas are heavy, the bunkers bode hell to the trimmer. The temperature in the stokehold is 53 and in the bunkers 55 degrees Centigrade—57 in the engine room.

The trimmer works alone. He works deep

below the water line in a swaying wandering room, in a room whose outlet is above and where all is quiet and still. The trimmers filled their barrows. Although Glen's muscles were at first rebellious, soon they eased. After ten barrow loads he had worked out his system. Thirty shovel loads fill a barrow. Then he must wait until the swell rolled under the ship and heave the moment the floor slanted beneath him. To move in the reverse moment when the ground rises demanded an almost impossible effort. A moment's rest after every ten loads. A ventilator shaft pierces the bunker, giving cool air from above. The trimmer pushes a coal block beneath it. He squats there, limp, reeling with faintness and the throbbing blood in his head. His head sinks and he watches the sweat blobs dropping in the coal dust and feels the cool air on his neck. Curious thoughts strike him as he squats below. It is depressing for a deckhand to lie so deep below water. Glen thought: "If the sea came in now, the only way out to the shaft below is blocked. I might get up through the ventilator—but there's a cross of iron bars in the middle. No one could get through there." He imagined the inrush of waters and

how he hung in the ventilator shaft and tugged at the iron bars.

Strange thoughts come to the trimmer in the dark, hot bunkers. Men have gone mad with them.

Chiquita stood for'ard in the bows. Seven bells had struck, half past eleven in the night. Glen had not come. Probably it was not that fact which hurt her. Her feeling towards him was not such as to make claims on him. It is even probable that his presence oppressed her a little. Probably, wholly absorbed in the darkness and solitude by her sorrow she would have wished to be alone. She had stood for an hour with the little bird asleep on her shoulder, leaning out over the rails in the place where a deep aperture had been made to pay out the cables for making fast. For an hour she had stared over the bows into the sea. A vague fear that someone might come to disturb her had clutched her back in a kind of cramp. She had drawn up her shoulders as though to protect herself from a clutching hand and her neck was stiff. Her Adam's apple was swollen and she swallowed with difficulty. In this night the wind

changed for the first time to nor' nor' west. It was the cold, hard wind of the north and one that jangles the nerves of all born in southern lands. There was a high sea. The ship cleaved the white combers stiff as a board. Now and again a great wave smashed against the sides, straining the plates up to the deck itself and flinging white spray over the rails. Fixed in this posture, blood beating in her head and care heavy in her heart, Chiquita had a dreadful vision: it was a vision that came from the Bible, from the roaring of the sea, from the threatening foam that rose often to her feet and from the dreadful life that had been her lot. A phrase struck her, maybe "the fleshpots of Egypt." With wide staring eyes she gazed into deep masses of flesh, mountainous heaps of white, flayed, dead flesh, animate with the life of corruption. She felt herself sink into it and it was quite soft, so soft that she must sink forever. She was caught in it like a quicksand. Great bones jutted like wrecks from the flesh. She clutched faces that stared at her, faces of men with the features of beasts, swinish faces. She clutched furred heads that detached themselves from the flesh masses and glided away. Putrefaction's stench

rose from the holes. Fat rotted and squelched through her clutching fingers like wet snow. She felt her hair stiffen as a great wave of nausea surged up within her. No physical instinct warned or saved her. Again came a vision from the Bible. Satan had taken her to the top of a high mountain. He spoke in her ear with the voice of an old man and the mountain swayed beneath her feet. She saw that the mountain swayed beneath her feet. She saw that the mountain must collapse with her. She felt that she must not close her eyes for fear of fainting; but she wanted to close her eyes. She felt a weariness that was like a sickness from which she could never recover. She became apathetic.

Now she believed herself to be dreaming—and each of us has dreamed her dream, the wild tumultuous endlessness of a sheer-dropping fall. Head downwards with wide staring eyes and hands outstretched in ridiculous anticipation of impact. Over her own shoulder she saw her fall, the tall column she had cloven through the wind.

Aft, on the rails over the screw hangs a shield with the words "Guardar se de taliones!"—"Keep

BITTER WATERS

clear of propellers!" Every seaman knows its meaning. It means that any human body falling for'ard from the rails of a ship under steam is whirled along the sides as in a cataract. In fifteen seconds it is dragged aft now under water, now above water, to where the enormous screws whirl their sixty-six relentless revolutions per minute of time, keen relentless blades of steel, fetishes of Death.

Chiquita was fully conscious immediately she touched water. She cried for help even as her nails scraped despairingly at the ship's smooth rising side and as her body lost all feeling of whither its wild plunge flung her. As a fact, only two seconds elapsed between her fall and the first alarm on deck of "Man overboard." The Third Wireless operator had chanced to leave the wireless cabin for a breath of cool air and was the first to hear her cry. Two seconds later the engine room telegraph rang, "Stop both engines!" The sirens wailed. Stewards on the afterdeck flung life-buoys overboard. It appeared that when the captain, clad only in underpants, rushed to the bridge, the first thing he saw was the Third Officer

BITTER WATERS

attempting to light the life-buoy with a match held in his trembling fingers. He discovered that the Third Officer was unaware that the life-buoys flare automatically on contact with water.

Chiquita saw how great was the ship. It rode the waves like a palace gleaming with hundreds of lights. Tall, mighty, secure, marvellous. A red ring floated past her, burst into sudden flame and died away. Hundreds of women's voices screamed on the "Hispaniola's" deck. Chiquita thought: "I'm wearing a white dress. They are sure to find me."

At 11.45, Able Seaman Glen climbed up the iron ladder of the stokehold. He climbed hand over hand and he felt in some peculiar way that his arms had lengthened. The weight of the coal barrow had been so heavy that now his body seemed to have lost its weight. He stood in the engine room hatchway and yawned, hungry for air. He coughed and spat and his spittle was black with coal dust. His naked trunk looked as though it had been painted dull black and only the hollows of the muscles, where the little rivulets of sweat trickled, were white against the black. He had to carry water for the stokers on watch, a

BITTER WATERS

bucket of hot water for every man. He stood in the hatchway, limp and leaning, gripped the frame with his hands. The night air was cool, refreshing as a bath, and he filled his lungs in three and four deep gulps. He started to go for'ard.

A cry on deck. A white-faced baker ran past, waving his arms. "Man overboard!" A cry from the upper deck: "Man overboard!" A cry: "Motor boat clear on the starboard!"

The "Hispaniola's" two motor boats lay on steel bridges over the main deck and you passed under them like under the bellies of two monstrous fish. They lay fast in their chocks, fastened with heavy rings to the bolts of the clamps. They were big boats, taller than a man, seaworthy, strong and heavy.

Shadows ran. It was dark on deck, almost utterly dark. The men breathed deep and harshly. In the two seconds that elapsed between the first cry of "Man overboard!" and the command, "Motor boat clear on the starboard!" the men on deck had started work on five different boats. Now they all rushed to the starboard motor boat. Hands flew. Fingers trembled; no pause for reflection even for a moment. The one knew in-

stinctively what was to be done, the other ran yelling along the deck and roused the ship.

Time stood still and an eternity lay between each intake of breath. Glen worked at the motor boat. He knelt at its side and ripped at the tarpaulin cover. From the corners of his eyes he could see the others at work. Each one of them seemed strangely quiet and worked as though in a dream where all movement is prolonged and slow. Each was acutely aware of the loudness of the other's breathing and all felt a furious blind rage that the boat should still rest rigid in the chocks. Ideas surged in their brains: "Cut it through! Cut the ropes! A knife, a light!" Glen had swung himself into the boat, three, four others after him. They flung out the wooden spars. The voice of the third bos'un snarled amongst them. Sharp, creaking noises and they hauled at the ropes of the tackle at both ends of the boat. The men in the boat felt it sway beneath their feet. With a screaming noise it glided forward and was carried clear of the side. Below on deck men turned at the davit levers and the steel carriers sank outwards. The "Hispiandola" carried modern davits of English construction.

BITTER WATERS

The motor boat sank. It sank past a wall of white faces that thrust out over the rails, mouths gaping and shrieking. Their ears went deaf. The wail of the sirens pierced the shrieking. Big searchlights now played into the boat. Men jumped from the rails into the boat and others clambered back up the man ropes on deck. The ropes coiled in the bottom tangled as the boat sank. The men in the boat all stood bent over the ropes, over the tackle blocks and worked. They were not aware that the boat was sinking. Glen saw two white jackets moving in the boat, dark yellow shadows. He heard the voice of the third bos'un. The ship's side loomed towering above the boat. The belly-bands in which the boat was slung gleamed white in the blaze of the searchlights. Below them reared the monstrous black surging of the sea.

Glen glanced a moment over the boat's edge. Good God! Mountains reared upwards, enormous black mountains set in sudden furious motion. Glen thought: "We can't lower a boat like this. The ship is still moving. We're on the wrong side. This is madness." He opened his mouth to cry something to the bos'un.

BITTER WATERS

At this moment the boat struck water, at this moment all cried aloud. Suddenly the boat was seized by some super-human fury; it flew and was flung—all hands clutched for some sure prop or stay—it was flung crashing against the ship's side.

What was it? In this second none thought of danger, but all were dumbfounded with surprise. Then they saw, saw that the tackle aft, the tackle that held the boat below, was unhooked but that for'ard the boat was still fast. The men on deck had paid out the ropes unevenly. The boat hung nearly vertical, hung stern deep in the sea. It hung like the weight of a monstrous pendulum. The waters snapped at the boat as though it were a pike hooked on a line. Water drenched them. Glen thought: "Now you're in the soup and all the others with you." The white jackets clambered up the man ropes, up and out from the boat, seeking to save themselves. One of the big tackle blocks smashed like a hammer against Glen's thigh. Twice, thrice the motor boat was flung aloft, crashing against the ship's side until it groaned in every joint. On deck the first officer cried: "The boat can't hold against that. Every manjack'll drown." The officer in the boat cried

out. Glen thought: "Now they're all yelling, it's best to keep quiet." The bos'un lay for'ard flat over the boat's prow, an old man of seventy, tough, white-haired and strong as a youngster. The boat shot forward. The bos'un had unslung the moveable hooks that held the for'ard tackle: suddenly the tackle swung aft over the boat. Clear away! The boat was clear and drove clear, swiftly free, split from the mother ship like a shooting star.

It was marvellous! Miraculous! The men felt themselves rocked in a mighty swing slung on rubber cables, softly, with an exaggerated softness but about them all was quiet and they too were quiet and no longer cried aloud. The sea was close to the verge of what a boat could stand but they felt themselves saved. Remarkably the white jackets who tried to clamber up the man ropes were all back in the boat. They worked at the motor with grunting curses. Everything they did was nonsense. In the hurry they had been mistaken for engineers. Really they were stewards. Now they began to remember why they were floating about below. Antonio, a big quartermaster, squatted at the tiller. He had thrust his

long body behind the tiny helm. He looked at the lifeless motor with raging eyes. The third bos'un still lay forward over the prow. Glen and a couple of others tried to ship the boat's few oars into the rowlocks.

There were eleven men in the boat, far too many. Four or five would have been quite enough. The trouble now was that the fourth officer could not find the key of the magneto. The fourth officer lay flattened next to the motor and suddenly his voice rang out. The motor began to throb.

The seas drenched the boat and drenched the men in the boat. The boat moved, lay deep in the water and cleaved the water. The air was filled with white foam. The fourth officer growled: "Look out on all sides." Beyond, two flares rode the wave crests. The motor boat climbed towards them. Unbelievable almost, how swiftly they climbed. A red belt floated past—empty! "Circle the buoy!" By God, this is no joke at all! The men aboard clutched tight at the rails, the salt water burning in their eyes. They could see no more. A deep wail from the ship. It meant:

BITTER WATERS

"I am laying off to starboard." "Go where the hell you like," thought the men in the boat. The women's voices wailed from the deck.

Antonio's quiet voice came from the tiller: "I can't get her round. It wants the strength of twenty." "Slower through the wind," cried the fourth officer. "Stop the motor. All listen for cries." A surging quiet, a faint splashing of the motor's belt in the water in the boat. Antonio was afraid to stop the engine altogether; God knows whether it would start again. "Stop!"—Quiet—muttering in the boat—sshh—still—quite still!—There!—Someone hissed. There! whimpering somewhere, quite soft—now high—choked, painfully choking, whining.—There! pointed a finger, there somewhere aft.

Away—foam—the boat danced like a ball and the seas smashed threateningly against the sides. A life-belt—empty. Cries: "There, there, there!" A life-belt swung in the trough—something white, a white mass, clung to the belt. Hard astern! The boat shivered as though held by rubber ropes. It slid towards the belt. The white mass sank, the mouth was under water. All in the boat thought

BITTER WATERS

the white mass a man, no other thought struck them at the cry "Man overboard!"

Boathooks! Useless! The man could no longer clutch. "He's sinking." The men in the boat went mad with rage. "He's sinking." Antonio started the engine again. The boat slid nearer. Bodies bent out over the gunwale—hard luck—the third bos'un nearly had him. "For God's sake don't let him get under the boat!" Glen leaned out amidships. He clutched hair in his fingers. He cried aloud. Cries: "Have you got him?" "I've got him!" Hands clutched and gripped under the arms. The limp body came hurtling into the boat as a willow rod hooks a fish on land.

"A woman!"

"Chiquita!"

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

SOFTLY singing, the lift climbed to the hotel's fifth storey. As we rose a thick column of gleaming steel next the lift sank downwards. A little wheel twisted quickly at its tip. The hotel was a high, narrow house in a street of high narrow houses near the dock. Its flaming sky sign had attracted us: "The Honolulu!" It seemed as though the house were a thermometer and the lift inside the quicksilver. It was hot in the lift, a dry heat. I could see the two of us in the little mirror—Chiquita in a black raincoat and a black hat. I do not know why she chose them; perhaps because of the rain. It always rains when you arrive in Hamburg. She looked pale, her eyes shone as though with fever. I saw my hands, heavy and clumsy, dangling at my sides and saw little pearls of sweet gleam on my brow. The hotel confused me, so long it was since I had been in one.

The lift gave a little click and I took Chiquita

BITTER WATERS

by the hand as I might my young sister. Red fire buckets hung in a long row down the narrow corridor. We trod silently on the carpet and listened for our noiseless tread. A chambermaid stepped into an open door to let us pass. Her face was pale and bloated; the foul air of the bedrooms, too little sleep, and a loose life. Her hair was tousled. I thrust my hands in my pockets but she had seen them already. She knew, oh, she knew exactly! If she had been a stewardess on board I would have hit her across the snout. The room was narrow. The brass beds filled nearly its whole width. An oil print hung over the bed. "Pecking Doves!" The bed linen was freshly ironed but dirty. The carpets and furniture old and worn. The air was foul and sticky—Ach! I guessed below that this was a house of assignation but was too weary to turn about.

Without stripping our overcoats we both went to the narrow window. We opened it and looked outside it rather than see the room. The air was like wet rags and mist swirled about the electric light bulb. The sky above the great city was deep pink. We could not see the walls of the houses nor the square windows; the sky signs and the

blazing placards of green and red electric lamps looked like a negative of the city. Below us long, gleaming snakes swung in a wide curve through the air and vanished below us in the tunnel; the glasses rattled on the commode. The high level! Motor horns squealed incessantly at the street corners; incessantly we heard them coming, humming, singing: Stop at the corner—r-ritsh!—the cogs screamed into low gear. The motors howled an octave higher—r-ratsh—the cogs jumped into high gear and away. And so through the whole night.

The beds were soft, unnaturally soft, and they swayed beneath us. The “Hispiandola’s” roll still lay in our limbs and bodies but the damned beds would not move with us. It had been a dreadful day. Packing in the early morning, the big kit bag on my shoulders, a packet under my arm and Chiquita behind me. I could not turn round because of the sack and felt afraid she might get lost somewhere. Rain and a slippery deck and a long wait for the green harbour steamer. Bad-tempered customs men. Everything had to be unpacked, piece by piece. What is this? What is that? A fine on ten pounds of sugar (but he did not spot

BITTER WATERS

the ten pounds of coffee swinging in my trousers against my leg in a long, thin sack). Paid off at eleven o'clock. (Chiquita sat for an hour in a café nearby.) Back on board to get the remainder of the baggage. The usual nonsense at the railway station. It's easier to buy a house in England than a rail ticket in Germany. And then I wanted to shew Chiquita how magnificent the hotels are in Europe—and I shewed her the Honolulu! She lay strangely rigid with the red coverlet drawn up to her chin and stared at the ceiling, at the naked filaments of the lamp. Her eyes blazed as though in fever and I knew she was trembling inwardly with excitement and would not sleep in the night. A man coughed behind the right-hand wall.

Behind the left-hand wall a woman squealed and a man groaned. What could I do with Chiquita? The hotel was dreadful, so foul as to make you retch.

I sat up in bed and reached for the switch. Once again I leaned toward Chiquita—"Sleep well, Chiquita! Will you be able to sleep?" She was silent, and did not move.—The room darkened.

I lay alert on my back. I held my breath and listened. I heard nothing. Time passed. Nothing!

Then I thought I heard something, a light shuddering in the feathers of the bed at my side.

I listened—waited—

Nothing—

Without moving my body—to keep the silence unbroken—I stretched out my arm towards the bed and let my hand grope slowly downwards. I felt.

I touched Chiquita's face. Wet with tears.

Weeping. She was weeping. Quite silently.

How to comfort her? I wanted so much to be able to do something. My heart went out towards her in sudden warmth. I thought maybe she was weeping because none really loved her, because none really understood her. All were beastly to her—even on board. Why on earth did she jump overboard? No one had any sympathy for her afterwards. All in their hearts were furious with her, as though she had intentionally placed lives in danger. I will never forget how her frail, ex-

BITTER WATERS

hausted, dripping body lay on the operating table and how the doctor massaged her breast. He injected camphor. He asked her: "Why did you do it?" There was no answer.

"Your father—"

"Haven't a father."

And the little green bird drowned.

CHAPTER II

Two o'clock in the afternoon. We had left the train that bore us to the coast an hour before and now we were on the tiny black steamer that sailed to my island. We remained on deck and were alone. The other passengers went below. The day was cold and the wind cutting. Besides ourselves there was only a cow on deck, bound to the anchor for'ard. She trod uncertainly from one foot to the other. The chain about her neck sank deep into her flesh. She was afraid.

I thought that Chiquita was afraid. Never in her life had she felt the cold endure so long a time and the language spoken here about her was stranger even than on the ship. She had never seen such women and in such clothes—the wives of the island peasants and fishermen. She had never seen such country.

This country was so flat and low that only its colour marked it from the sea. The air was damp and grey and perhaps Chiquita saw no land at all

and perhaps she thought we must travel ever so, further and further towards an endlessly receding horizon. I felt the strangeness in her so strongly that everything to me seemed strange. I could no longer understand myself. It seemed almost a crime to bring Chiquita here. I had imagined it all so differently. I crossed to the lee side of the little steamer: "See, there's no wind here. And it's warm near the funnel. If you sit down there you won't freeze any more. We'll soon be there. The house, our home, is the first you see." And I wanted the old tub to travel faster. I wanted to shew her the house, to shew her that she would soon be home. She could not hold out much longer; she huddled, crouched and close pressed to the funnel and tried to draw up her knees high enough for her skirt to cover her feet but could not. Her little nose was quite red and her little face quite white and huddled in her coat collar. And with the arm I pressed about her shoulders I felt the shuddering of her body. But she would not go below into the cabin among all those dangerous-looking fisherwives with their black bonnets of tarred straw.

I had seen the house a long time before but it

was still so distant and diminutive that it would not have made the right impression had I shewn it to her. It was a red speck over the shore's pale green girdle of reed. It came nearer and nearer but never seemed to increase its size. Funny that! It had been larger when I saw it in my memories. "Look, there it is! The trees belong to the house and so does the land in front—you can't see it properly now, it lies so low—but that is the meadow." I dared no longer speak of "our" home, "our" garden, "our" meadow, for I did not know whether she would ever take to them so possessively. "Look, there is the high chimney and the high chimney, you know, is a landmark. The boat we're on is steering by the high chimney." But neither was that, I thought, calculated to make a good impression. And in the same moment that I pointed out the chimney I saw that a large part of it was missing. "Look, now you can see the windows. There are six in all. The second little house is a barn and the small building that looks like a Mexican hut, that is the closet." I looked at her sidelong and saw her large black eyes gazing at the house hopelessly and without understanding of its meaning. She stroked her

face with her hands and pushed away the wisps of hair so that she might see the better—she was afraid.

And gradually I became afraid; for when the house lay opposite the steamer I saw that I could see quite through it; the shutters were all torn down and all panes broken—the youngsters!

As the windows back and front lay flush it had given them immense pleasure to be able to fling a stone clean through the house. I saw holes in the brick work as well. I knew what that was: the frost had penetrated the damp crevices and forced out the bricks. I had forgotten. In my memory I had mortared all those niches tight and clean.

We sailed further. The girl did not understand why the boat should steam past, why we should not now go ashore, now that apparently we had arrived. The water was deathly still. The mist grew thicker. The land disappeared. But the fir brooms that marked the channel, the winter landmarks, glided past us close to our sides. From the way they lie you can tell that the tide is flowing and that land is near. Then we heard surging and that was the surf, the tide rolling in upon the

shore meadowland. The dull moan of the fog-horn came from out where the lighthouse stood—and suddenly the steamer blasted out a shriek of steam. Its siren was immoderately loud and swallowed up half the little engine's steam. Chiquita shrank closer to the funnel—and the cow moaned.

That was the music of the island's greeting. The reed girdle narrowed on both sides. We were in the harbour mouth. Seagulls rose screaming from the water. We saw masts. The masts jutting from the plump bodies of the fishing boats in the harbour—poles with lanterns. It was the middle of the day but the lanterns burned because of the fog. Roof of a small shed that held coal for the steamer. People on the quay: a couple of women who had been washing clothes in the harbour and two postmen in black capes with a little yellow cart between them. Further behind them stood a cart with two horses probably belonging to the peasant waiting for the cow. A wide sand track led inland from the harbour. The houses were hidden in the mist but I knew they lay strewn about the island, a dozen peasant holdings and a handful of brick cottages where retired sea captains lived.

We landed. I brought all the baggage ashore and Chiquita sat silent and frozen on the American tin trunk. I ran to borrow a handcart; the things were too heavy to carry. I wanted to hurry for it was so dreadful to think of Chiquita sitting there fearful and forlorn in the thick fog. I ran and the cart rattled behind me. She was there. I loaded the cart and the sight of our things was good and comforting, everything to ease our island life. The tin trunk and two kit bags of mine, one white and one green. Two homemade hammocks and still another box filled with provisions. Ready. I felt happy. I was warm and the girl caught something of it and saw that her day had come, that now she could do something. She lost her pallor; independence of action flushed her cheeks. She stood at my side and grasped the handle. We leaned forward together. Our cart began to creak through the deep white sand of the shore meadows, shorn of grass by the cattle.

CHAPTER III

WE arrived. Chiquita was tired. She sat on the handle of the cart. She stroked the hair that had strayed from her dark hat out of her eyes. Her head sank downwards and I thought she was not far from tears. The air was still as death and the sun hung low and the twilight was beginning. Peewits circled over the meadow and about the house. They called their mating cries. The first bats of the evening fluttered from the eaves.

It is impossible for any man to judge his native land. It is dreadful when you see that it appears barren and cheerless to someone whom you would have know its beauties. And who could understand its beauties: the flat low-lying narrow strip of land with its far horizon of sea and sky and the poor soil scarcely worthy of the name of earth? The meadow about my house grew on the sand of the dunes and was scattered with thin, low grass and here and there with patches of pure sand.

One of them was a potato patch. The potatoes were still in the ground; no one to harvest them in the autumn. I saw the crumbling walls of the outhouse and the straggling garden hedge. It made me depressed and I could no longer look upon its barren cheerlessness. Nothing could restore it but work, hard work.—This day we should have enough to do to secure food and shelter.

I tried to explain to her: "It's no use for us to go into the real house. Everything there is smashed and damp. We'll take our things into the little house and sleep there."

She nodded and we drew the cart before the door. I was happy that she did not cry; that she ran and that I must run with her. I thought that now her mind had concentrated on the one fact—there was much work to do. The door of the outhouse was nailed. I knocked out the clamps with a big stone and the door creaked open. Peasant-wise it was made with an upper and lower half. For two years now no person had set foot inside. Every floor board creaked beneath our feet. Fat spiders fled fear-stricken from the windows where they had spun their webs over the broken panes. At least the room was dry. Except for a rusty

bedstead and a green painted pump near the door it was empty. I trampled down the stinging nettles before the door that Chiquita might not be hurt. Plaster from the fallen roof lay on the floor's thick covering of dust.

"Take the things out of the cart."

I became suddenly furious: we must eat and sleep and live like human beings. What rotten mess was this?

I ran to the house. No time to open the nailed door. I felt through a broken pane for the catch and the window opened and I sprang inside. A huge toad hopped heavily over the flagged flooring leaving a wet trail behind. Everything was damp. Wood rotted, iron rusted. I had no time now to look. I went in the kitchen and flung open cupboards and windows. The spiders' webs tore with faint shrieks. Plaster crumbled from the window frames and walls.

I flung them through the window, got a bucket (thank God it was not yet rusted through), brooms and scrubbing brushes, pulled down a couple of the faded curtains (they could only be used as rags) and ran back. With much effort and inexperienced hands, Chiquita had unloaded the cart.

BITTER WATERS

"We must clean up here first of all." I pressed the broom in her hand and ran to the well. There was water in it, brown, brackish—bitter. Even a well goes rotten, unused. I pulled a length of cord from my pocket and tied it to the bucket, held the bottom upward and let it fall! Splash! A dozen frogs fled to the niches of the bricked well. Their long hind legs protruded surprised and quivering. A pallid frog corpse came out with the first bucketful. I threw it away so that Chiquita might not see.

"There you are, we've water already!" Aboard the "*Hispaniola*" there was everything. Hot, flowing water, cold water, ice water. But I forgot all that. Chiquita had finished sweeping. The barn was not large but there was a great pile of dirt. Now I could help her and I threw off my jacket. I had grown so warm. I rolled up my sleeves and washed down the windows with the wet cloth. The webs wound tenaciously about my hands. Many spiders came tumbling down and I trod on them casually without pausing to look. We washed the floor boards together and the dry wood sucked deep in the water.

We carried our things inside: "Unpack!" I

poured the remainder of the water in the pump. The handle creaked. The pump sucked—and suddenly spewed water. That was marvellous, as though the dead returned to life. At first the water was dull with rust, but it turned clear and transparent. There was flowing water, flowing free as the ship's water.

It was dark now. A moment of rest. The air was exciting and cool and smelled of mist and the spring. Beyond, the lighthouse painted a band of white over the horizon. There was no time to waste—no time at all to waste. There was work to be done.

The petroleum bottle to be brought from the pantry in the house. It was half full. It had buoyed me up the whole time, that half bottle. I had set my hopes upon it. I brought two of the least rusty among the pans. All the pans were iron. I brought the oil stove, an ancient instrument that had lain unused for years and much given to explosion. I brought my tool box: every tool rusted but usable. And I carried all across to the outhouse.

Chiquita unpacked blankets and overalls from the kit bags. She worked slowly—but she worked.

BITTER WATERS

Fire is the thing most requisite for cooking. I put the stove on the floor and filled it; much regulating of rusty screws and trimming of dried wick, a dozen matches struck and then it burned. It burned in a ring of beautiful yellow flame tipped with blue: hot flame.

"Wash the pans with spirit! We can't cook with all that rust in them!" She thought it strange to put petroleum in the pans you eat from but she did it. She was shrewd; she strewed sand and sat on the threshold in the fading light and rubbed with petroleum, sand and rag. I clambered over her. I had forgotten candles, the spade and many other things.

When I returned I saw the flicker of fire in the house and a woman—what more can any man wish? Only food remained. The night wind had risen and from the sea came the roar of the tide. The peewit slept. I ran across the field and dug potatoes. They were small but sound and not even frozen. The winter must have been mild.

Chiquita unrolled the hammocks. She looked up for hooks. She proved herself shrewd and

BITTER WATERS

thought of everything to be done. Everything began to look better.

“Wash the potatoes and cook them.”

Two candles lit the room brightly but two things had to be watched. First, to move carefully lest the draught extinguish them. Second, the door had to be kept closed and the windows made tight. Otherwise the mist came in and the room became cold. I opened the big chest with a crow-bar. Everything there to make life possible on the island, all carefully packed in java matting. I hung the mats over the broken panes. I brought out a tin of preserved butter and a tin of cocoa. Salt? Damn! where is the salt? Finally I found some in the house, quite wet, more paste than crystal.

The water boiled and it smelled of potatoes and they smelled good, better than I have ever smelled them in my life. Then, bread from the chest and a tin can of sugar. It's sometimes worth while stealing things. Everything we had was the result of hard theft or hard work and each gives pleasure in its own way.

While Chiquita stirred the potatoes with a stick,

BITTER WATERS

I ran once more to the house for knives and forks. Tin cups, two wooden platters for chopping meat, no plates left. The knives were so rusty that I left them lying there. A clasp knife is better anyhow. Finally I went to the little wooden hut and pulled the nails from the door—and everything clean and ready even down to the paper. Closet O.K.—Everything O.K.

And as a fact, Chiquita had set up housekeeping. She had emptied her case and put the stove on the top. She had turned her tin trunk into a bench and the foodstuffs lay ranged along the wall like a dining room: jam, corned beef, sausage, even pineapple and wine.

We sat down and ate. It was simply a miracle how we had transformed the outhouse in those two short hours. Two courses. Potatoes with salt and buttered rolls. A thought struck me suddenly. I cleaned the potato pot and filled it with Spanish wine, put sugar in and set it on the flame. We would not freeze that night.

The candle flames burned upright and still and no breath of wind stirred in the room. We heard the wind and heard the sea and heard the rustling in the reeds. Our home was warm and brightly

BITTER WATERS

lit. We sat at a table with our bellies filled. I lit my pipe. Everything was excellent.

No other place to sling the hammocks except from the beams and the beams were fairly high. I slung them side by side. The cooker we placed outside the door: it stank. I laid the pipe on the beam above my head next the tobacco pouch and matches. I lifted Chiquita from the ground and laid her in the hammock from above, carefully, as I might a child. She smiled, smiled happily and drowsily. I blew out the candles. I swung her hammock and my own, gently. Sailors on a man-o'-war swing them like that. The candles were out. We heard the sea and the wind and the reeds and we heard a rat gnawing in the wood. And we slept.

CHAPTER IV

IN the morning we viewed the damage. We sat on the sand heap before the door. It was sheltered from the wind and almost warm. Chiquita blinked in the sun. I calculated with my finger in the sand: how much are seventeen German marks, three Australian pound notes, an English ten shillings, four Indian rupees and seven Mexican pesos? I left the copper money that the banks will not change out of the calculation.

The whole of it was not much to repair a half tumbledown house. It was really tumbledown. It is best, I thought, to start from the top and work downwards. Dirt falls downwards.

I clambered to the roof. The felting was weathered and grey. Big, irregular patches were dark with damp and the wood below had rotted. I had to go carefully to avoid falling through. The chimney had to be bricked up again at all costs and that first of all. I dropped into the attic

through the skylight. The floor was littered with scraps of the roof felting, plaster, cobwebs, and mouse dirt. Here and there little heaps of powdered wood lay on the boards—worm-eaten! There were numerous cracks in the tiled wall through which the daylight shone. The window frames sat loose in the brickwork. The mortar was frozen out and the panes were all smashed. Down on the ground floor the furniture lay in wild disorder, covered thick with dust. All the fabrics had rotted so that you could push your fingers through. An ant track led through the living room. There were mouse holes in the corners.

It seemed to me that most of it was a man's work. I found a sheltered spot for Chiquita where she could sit in the sun and brought her all the pots and pans and cutlery I could lay my hands on. I gave her a bucket, water and sand: "It is very cold, Chiquita, and I'm sorry. I can't help it. It seems to me the best thing you can do is to scrub away as hard as you can. That will warm you."

I hauled the cart to the village, bought petroleum, two pounds of soft soap, soda, nails, a tin

BITTER WATERS

of carbolic and a load of tiles. On the return journey the cart was so heavy that I was forced to set it down and rest again and again.

We laid the first fire with wood from a broken chest. The grate had rotted and rusted and the fire burned badly. The stove pipe had rusted through and I had to make a cement of lime and straw to mend it. The fire drew. I put a bucket on the stove and brewed a liquor to the ship's old recipe: two handfuls of soft soap, three handfuls of soda. While the liquor heated I carried all the furniture outside. The small pieces went through the window, the large through the door. A sorry heap. There was not much of it and most no use. I piled it together. I would have liked best to sprinkle it with paraffin and make a bonfire of the lot.

I began to swab the sticks with the liquor. It was worth it. The spiders fled across the meadow. Mouse dirt fell from every cupboard. Grey scabs peeled from the paintwork, and the colour, where it still remained, gleamed like new. The liquor drew. The furniture stood wet and clean in the meadow and sucked the sun into its wood. In the darkness behind the shutters it had

become pale and misanthropic. The two iron beds could still be used and the wardrobe was quite beautiful. Scrubbing had loosed the joints of most of the chairs and left them only fit for fire-wood.

I brewed new liquor and went above and washed down the whole house from roof to cellar. I collected all the dirt and broken glass together and buried it deep in a hole in the garden. Now the house looked bare, like the shell that remains after a fire and for a moment I sat on the ground made miserable by the thought of such misfortune. We had only just arrived in time. Another six months and the house would have fallen to the ground.

And then I discovered that the miserable feeling in my stomach was really hunger and that it was near evening. We spent the remainder of the day improving the comfort of the outhouse. We pressed two new pans into service and cooked the meal on a perfected stove.

In the evening we made a tour of our domain. We found our lands large and I watched the fishes leap with great content. It was not going to be a bad year. We dug a heap of potatoes that would last us a week.

BITTER WATERS

We awoke to the pitter-patter of a thousand birds on our flat roof: starlings. We went to the door and they winged away with a humming like metal propellers, plumage gleaming like burnished steel.

A second time we trundled the cart to the village. We bought mortar from a builder, a second load of tiles, a half barrel of tar, ten pounds of oil-paint, Russian red, and two brushes. We lifted all the shutters from their hinges and Chiquita had her first painting lesson on their smooth boards. She used the small brush and painted the first in an hour. Then she noticed that it went more easily if she used the big brush and that an apron is useful when you are painting. She saw it was better first to paint the corners and edges and then the broad flat surfaces and that the colour must be laid on twice, down and across. At first I let her paint her own way; she had to learn from her own mistakes. In the second hour she painted two shutters.

I took a table and chair, and mounted on them I reached the roof with comfort. I let down a rope and Chiquita bound the tar-pot to the end. The tar had been heated to make it fluid. It is

satisfying work to tar a roof. I nailed new felting tightly round the chimney stack and with fifty pounds of tar the roof was like new,—black, gleaming and watertight.

We painted then, the two of us together and wagered on our skill. Chiquita watched me closely in case I cheated. Often I looked at her and was glad: she painted with rapid, healing strokes, so using the brush that the large surfaces were quickly covered. We painted the window frames red. We painted all the doors red. We poured petrol-eum on the hinges to stop them creaking. We scraped the squashed spiders from the niches. We painted the furniture red; the whole of the kitchen, the stairs and the beams beneath the roof—all red. And then we went with greedy eyes and sought anything that was not yet red. Painting became a kind of mania. Our hands had thick callouses on the painting fingers. My overalls were red spotted and Chiquita's apron was soaked stiff with Russian red. I could break pieces of red from her. Even the grass before the house was more red than green.

We were lucky; the wind blew sharp and hard and the sun shone by day. The house dried.

BITTER WATERS

We arranged the furniture. There was so little that there was little doubt where to place each piece. I bought window panes, putty and borrowed a diamond. The panes kept out the wind and we were so proud of them that you might have thought Chiquita and myself the prime discoverers of glass. We bought cheap cloth from a pedlar, cloth such as the Polish peasant women use to sling their children at their breasts. We made curtains and coverings. We bought a copper frying pan, a flat basket and a wooden washtub with brass hoops. Wonderful things.

One day we carried all our belongings into the new house. We brought dried grass and wood for kindling. We dug all the potatoes and carried them into the cellar. There was an iron grate in the kitchen which drew well, and polished and painted with black lacquer, looked like new. All necessary utensils hung orderly in the kitchen. All the tools were cleaned of rust and all cutting implements sharpened. The big sea chest had been turned into a low table. Sea grass mattresses and woollen blankets lay on the beds. Everywhere it smelled of paint and in many places it was not yet dry. I bought ten old wooden cases in the

village and they stood in a row along the living room wall, the lids attached by leather hinges. These cases were big enough to hold all our clothes and possessions. They were painted red and furnished with mattresses above they formed a long divan, long enough for a man to lie outstretched. Two chests and a board across: a writing table. Maps and charts hung on the walls. The library was formed of books assiduously stolen from ships, from the "ocean comfort" chairs where the passengers had left them lying forgotten.

The people from the village came to see how beautiful the old house had now become and how the red paint gleamed. The days became warmer.



CHAPTER V

THE days were too short. The work of the day penetrated into sleep and limbs jerked in dreams, lusting for employment.

My head never rested; it thought things out and all my dreams were plans for the future:—I always saw the garden. There was a fence of heavy oak, salvaged from a wreck. The soil lay hidden under a marvellous bright green growth. All young plants, the tender luscious vegetables of which you dream on board ship where nothing is ever fresh: young lettuces in juicy green bunches, tender young beans, slender peas whose shells are almost transparent and where the tiny sweet spheres lie bedded like pearls in velvet. Asparagus grew in long ordered rows in sand almost purely white but rich with manure. Dawn and a curved cutting blade and a search for the tender white tips as yet untouched by the light. Gherkins, the heavenly fruit, nothing but clean white flesh and pearling freshness when the knife cuts

through, grateful fruit which lie almost leafless in their beds as though dropped from heaven. Tomatoes; and the downy leaves are odorous of chlorophyl and the warm sun when you crush them, polished spheres of tiny luscious seed, a magnificent red harmonising with the white of the hothouse wall and the dark sap-green of their feathery leaf. White bread and salt with it; I ask no more. Radishes, so round, so plump that their red bodies burst the earth and need no washing. Crisp and juicy, all ready for the breakfast table. A small bright green forest of petersilias, palms in miniature, and water cresses and hedges of sweet pea—so were the Chinamen's gardens in Mexico and so were the market gardens in Holland. And to give my dream reality, I dreamed everything to make it possible for me—a marvelous windmill pumping water in the middle of the garden. Black, dungy earth, fed from the great manure heap and forcing beds in wooden frames under glass. A stout fence to shield all from wind. The Mexican sun—the dream pulsed action through my body as I slept and I awoke early before the dawn. I could bear it no longer, but must set about the gardening. God knows, it was a

BITTER WATERS

romantic plot enough and could anything take root from ideals its soil was well manured.

I began to dig. My spade thrust furiously in the tough earth tangle of sod and weed. It squelched through their roots and then deeper into the soil, easily, surprisingly easily. It curved upwards, turned in the air so that the grass fell downwards in the hole—and then a hearty spank with the flat of the spade from above so that the sod lay tight.

Foot by foot—it was astounding: as I dug and turned the soil, it seemed beautifully black and fruitful. An hour later when I spat on my hands and looked back upon it, its magnificence had all departed. It was dry, crumbling and almost white—sand!

I marked off a large square plot about the house; the fence would come later when the plot was ready. Now I had to prepare for sowing. My work was not finished with the digging. I opened the midden and it stood filled to nearly a yard high, black and in good condition after nearly two years, a homogeneous liquid of a business-like and by no means pleasant aroma. I was sorry for it. The sand sucked it up like a sponge. Between

one libation and refilling the bucket at the midden all was dry again. It angered me. It was like casting pearls before swine. It lasted a morning; it gave of its best in the thick black bottoms—but that was to form a bed by itself—there the mushrooms could thrive.

It was finished and only a tiny portion of the garden was manured. And the single bucketfuls I would get at intervals afterwards would only so to speak be like a drop on a hot stone. I did not know a great deal about gardening but I had seen things in foreign countries unknown in native parts and my garden became a kind of experimental station for foreign methods.

There was seaweed for instance. The season of spring storms had passed and the great waves had torn long strands of seaweeds, encrusted and tangled with muscles, reeds and little fishes from the flat weedy shallows and rolled them to the shore. The shoreland of my holding was full of it, a wall that looked like a thick moss cushion, several yards wide and stretching along the coast. The plants, the tiny shell fish, the fish and the soil entangled in it should surely be of value to feed

BITTER WATERS

my land. There only remained the problem of getting it to the garden.

I took the three-pronged fork over my shoulder and the cart in my hand and went to the shore. The topmost layer was white and dry with air and sun and it cracked between the fork's prongs. But below it was bright green and so wet that the water dripped down in streams as I lifted it, filled with tiny darting marine life. Below, the dirty water ran from the cart like a leaky automobile and above I could pile it high as a hay cart in June.

It was hard to pull. The shore was irregular, hilly and pitted with sand holes. I did not count how often my cart tipped over, but it must have been many times. Every cartload made a little heap, a pretty small heap on my land. I needed hundreds of cart loads. The shore was thick with wheel tracks and the soil sucked the seaweed's water deep and the sun bleached and dried the strands. It was not the best manure but it would help, it had to help. I tried first to burn it thinking that its ashes would prove far better manure than the greenstuff. I piled it in great heaps, fed it with dry timber and even drenched it with petroleum but it never burned well.

BITTER WATERS

Then, filled with rage and despair as to its fitness, I dug the whole lot into the soil.

I must hurry, time was pressing, the sowing must be done and the plants must grow. I had heard said that gherkins need horse dung. I gathered it in the evening when the light began to fail. I fared forth, shovel on my shoulder, bucket in hand, over the steaming meadows and there where the steam rose most densely lay horse dung or cow flop. I shovelled it all into the bucket, carried it to the garden and buried it in a little hole. I marked it with a stick: later a little gherkin plant would grow there. But it was not enough. Tomatoes for instance are so exacting. They would thrive so excellently against the south wall where the sun's whole heat poured back from the tiled wall; but as I have said the house was built on sand and surrounded by its own rubble.

I found a spot where good soil lay, or rather limestone with layers of manure. I dug a yard deep and a yard wide along the whole of the wall. It was no easy work for a single pair of hands but it had to be done quickly, every day that passed robbed me of a chance. Winter sets in early in those parts. In those weeks I became lean; the

BITTER WATERS

sweat sucked every ounce of fat from my muscles and only my arms grew bigger. The house looked as though a gas main were being led to it. The sand and rubble I piled over to the windward of the garden to make a wall. (Later I would plant it with grass to bind it from the play of the wind.) As the wall grew the hole in the patch of good soil I had found became deeper and wider. I had to lift the shovel high and I could scarcely see from it. I shovelled the good soil into the trench along the wall, bedding it well with seaweed. It became a bed, filled deep with rich earth and stretching along the length of the wall.

Now the tomatoes could come!

To hear it told might make it all seem simple and even pleasant. But working, during all the fruitless striving, during the whole of this diletante and hopeless undertaking, often I flung the spade aside and ran for refuge to Chiquita.

Then I was happy just to watch her simple, certain movements, movements whose results were always tangible, always successful. I was content when I could help her: wring clothes, clean knives in the sand, split kindling for the kitchen. She would smile at me then a little sarcastically, but

amicably, and give me a glass of milk. Then back to my devilish task.

We bound a long length of twine to a couple of sticks and with these we marked the beds, long, narrow strips of earth whose breadth a hand would span. It was voluptuous almost to tread in the soft earth of the narrow paths between them.

We had seeds sent us from the town. Pretty little packets fronted with a little picture gay with idealized growths. The inscription informed us that each packet sufficed for a family of five persons. We were only two persons so we had implicit faith in the packet's inscription. The beans were most beautiful of all to set. You bore holes with your longest finger and drop in two, three of the smooth well-formed seeds so that their dark generative spot comes uppermost and when the hole is fatly packed with earth, you have a sensation as of buried treasures. The gherkins come in tiny plants each with two little leaves which reach out in mute appeal from the soil like children's hands. The tomato plants are a shade larger but they are very delicate. It was tragic to see how they wilted before the onslaught of the weed roots in the new soil, however carefully they were

BITTER WATERS

watered. The lettuce seeds were so small that it seemed too much to hope that anything could sprout from them. Sometimes the seed stayed remarkably long beneath the soil's surface, far longer than the inscriptions allowed them and it needed tremendous restraint to refrain from plunging both hands into the bed to see what was become of them. The small grey half-moons of the turnip seed we set in shallow ditches and scattered the soil over them from both sides carefully and thinly. The small black sweet pea spheres we set in the bed along the wall and along the fence the white flat little ships of sunflower seed.

In the evening we strolled in our garden. Our backs were weary but our spirits contented. Chiquita's hands were no longer smooth and soft; she worked at whatever she could find to do and her hands had sown all the garden's flowers. We saw its bare surfaces with the eyes of fantasy and we rejoiced in the dew that fell. Now we went to sleep with the feeling: Now, as we lie abed the seed we have sown is pushing nearer to the surface. Perhaps tomorrow there will be something to be seen. And in the morning, when the first sunrays warmed and dried the felting, the birds perched

on our flat roof. Sparrows, starlings, in their hundreds. Crows sat in the rowans in front of the house and crows in the crippled apple trees behind. And all of them preened their frozen plumage and warmed themselves in the morning sun and blinked with shrewd eyes on the new dug garden. Then after a little reflection, when the moment seemed most opportune they flapped and fluttered down and picked with zeal and industry at the sweet seeds and tender roots that lay in the rich beautiful soil. I came and the beds were covered with the prints of their tiny delicate claws and the tiny holes pierced by their sharp beaks. There was not much that succeeded in avoiding their attention and beaks.

What could I do? I made fearsome and threatening scarecrows and twisted twine with fluttering flapping rag but it made no impression on them. All birds by the sea are used to things that flap and flutter. I tried a recipe of lime and twigs. Everything stuck fast to it, especially my hands, everything but the birds. I took the paper from fly traps and wound it like puttees about long twigs. No use. The only thing that scared them was the thunder of my rusty flint. Sparrows taste

BITTER WATERS

good wrapped in bacon and roasted and eaten, bones and all, like larks.

The word went round from worm to worm throughout the island: there is a certain place where the soil is rich and abounding in the most delicate little roots; it rains there more than in any other place. We will go there all of us.

And they came, all of them came to live in my garden and each morning I found my young plants wilted and some dragged back into the earth, sad to look upon as children sinking in a swamp.

What could I do against them? There were so many worms that the fishermen came secretly at nights with lanterns and dug their bait there. And neither was that good for the garden.

All the moles left their meadows and pitched their hillocks in my garden. The rich soil had tempted them, the humidity, the manure, I know not what. Their tunnelling murdered my plants' tender roots, whole rows shed their leaves flat on the ground and died and their many hillocks gave the garden the appearance of a thriving cemetery.

I trampled their tunnels in again and again. But the moles were untiring, more tenacious than I. I poured petroleum in their holes—no use. I

BITTER WATERS

tried to drown them subterraneously with water. Still they lived. Traps of twig and wire would not catch them. I tried to cultivate a taste for them in my cat, but the cat proved chary. It was war to the knife. Every morning I stood in the garden motionless as a scarecrow, carving knife in hand, waiting. And where anything moved within reach the blade plunged into the earth like white lightning. Often there was a squeak; one of the black devils had departed its life. But my arm's reach could not embrace the whole garden.

Now I built the garden fence, both on account of the fishermen and for the sake of good order. I built it of driftwood, of broken planks, logs, boards, boxes and long rusty nails. But it was all so short that I had always to nail two or three pieces together to make a single upright. They did not look beautiful and were difficult to drive into the earth. I found a piece of mine sweeping net from the war time, red with rust but still good enough for fencing.

The fence stood firm and excluded the wind at that side. But now the wind changed direction and hurtled into the garden from above and pranced between the house and the fence manufacturing

BITTER WATERS

whirlwinds. It was mass strangulation. It twisted the lettuce heads off, bruised the delicate leaves against the ground, bowed the plants to earth and drove them round and round until they cut circular furrows in the soil and then they died.

Every day Chiquita gathered two handfuls of green caterpillars from the cabbages and apple trees and I pulped them with my feet. In spite of this every leaf was punctured like a sieve. At least the radishes thrived, robust and wooden, well-suited to the climate—but some few were eatable. Otherwise there was little else in the garden.

Many plants produced dwarf growths, and the hardy among them, such as cabbage, grew to bushes, tough of stalk and leaved like brooms. The finer plants like tomatoes mostly went black on the stalk instead of red and simply rotted. The lettuce grew lustily but without head. The weed I had buried never rotted as I thought: it grew, it thrust everywhere with its long tough roots. You might have taken the garden for a dyke.

I strove until the autumn. To-day I must laugh at myself, at my wild struggle with soil and climate, but then it was bitter earnest. I had sought as it were to build our life on that garden.

BITTER WATERS

Seamen say: sailors make bad farmers. I wish I had believed them. I tilted against barren sand and an inimical climate like a Don Quixote against the windmills. I expected too much.

CHAPTER VI

BOAT, Boat, Boat—without a boat it was impossible to live. I needed a boat for fishing, for gathering wood, needed it for bathing, to reach the forest land and post. I needed a good stout boat, easy rolling, with a lee board and sprit sail, about five and a half yards long and cut low for'ard so that I could dip in the sea with it now and again—a boat something like the smallest of the “Hispaniola’s” life-boats.

I thought always how easy it would have been to thief one; I had the whole scheme worked out but it was too late now to do anything except tell it to Chiquita.

“Did you ever see them on the ‘Hispaniola’? Did you see them slung in their davits two by two, one above the other? Do you know how many there were on each side? There were sixteen. The smallest would suit us fine here and there they are swinging about uselessly. No one ever uses them. We had to wash them down four

BITTER WATERS

times on each trip and paint them twice and still they rotted in the sun, the timbers cracked and the ropes and sailcloth frayed. A damned shame! Before every trip they lower them into the water and fill them up with stewards and trimmers to teach them to row in case of danger. They crawl round the harbour like lame spiders and the officers at the tiller shriek themselves hoarse. Then a commission comes aboard. Retired captains who look the whole time as though they're apologising for still being alive. They lift up a corner of the tarpaulins and stick their noses in the dark and fish about to see if the water barrel is still there and if there's sufficient weevil in the biscuit and whether the compass still points north. And then when they've counted all the matches in the boxes they say: 'Everything in order, good-bye and thanks very much,' and for their part the ship can put to sea.

I wish now I'd brought one along with me. It was easy. Listen here: the day the stewards learn to row the boats are left in the water overnight to proof them.

They are made fast to the rails with a painter. After supper when it's dark I go on deck and lean

BITTER WATERS

all nice and easy against the rails and smoke a pipe or so and all the time I slowly untie the boat I like best. Then I take a little stroll aft along the deck. There's no harm in a little stroll even if anyone were looking. My hand dangles harmlessly over the rails and holds the painter tight. The boat wags about below and then gradually it notices which way we're going and sets off for a little trip on its own, with a bit of keel water behind it for all the world like a duck swimming. No one could see any harm in that now! Why shouldn't a boat have a bit of fun now and again? And so we stroll along and find ourselves near the stern and the stern curves inwards and if I pull on the painter the boat goes underneath the stern where it can't be seen. It lies in deep shadow and I make it fast there.

Then I go for'ard and collect the things I want to take with me—and a brush and paint pot with 'em. Good-bye, ship! I double the painter, drop into the boat and pull the line in after me, set sail and away! If I haven't a friend among the ferrymer. to look after the boat for me then all I want is a couple of hours and a fairly decent wind to sail her over to the *Deutscher Werft* and run her

BITTER WATERS

ashore on the Blankanese side. Then all I have to do is to scrape out the old name clean and paint in the new. Lorelei, Sea Eagle, Annie or whatever you fancy for a name. It can lie there high and dry among the other boats and it's nothing to do with anybody else even if it does lie there. What's a little boat like that to a company with so many big ships? Then we sail home in her and have a fine boat of our own."

Chiquita threw back her head and laughed so that her throat danced and her eyes were bright and shiny with pleasure. She sketched it all out after me and naturally she laughed at a face I would pull when they caught me with my stolen boat.

She was often pleased and merry now the weather grew warmer.

I could of course buy a boat but we had little money left. Plans—plans.

For a time I thought of making a kind of raft of dry plaited reeds such as the Nile niggers use and went reflectively to the creek bank, sickle in hand. I cut some bundles and bound them to-

BITTER WATERS

gether. I threw it in the water but it did not float well. No use.

Perhaps a kind of folding boat, a frame of wood stretched with tarred sailcloth. One whole day I tinkered about with the frame—and flung it away. Later the ribs made sticks for the tomatoes.

It had to be a real boat.

I found one. The lighthouse keepers wanted to sell one for twenty marks; built of coppered oak, they said. Cheap!

We went along. I was dressed in my blue suit and a collar and tie and I took Chiquita by the hand. Three long hours we walked on the soft sand of the shore. The boat lay in a creek—surprising how it came to be there. A mile broad sand bank stretched from the lighthouse out to sea. With every big storm it changed its shape and the ribs and spars of ships that had foundered there in the course of centuries jutted out from the sand like giant bones. Behind lay the creek, a deep ditch fringed heavily with reed, and a shallow channel bored from it through the sand bank to the sea. It seemed almost impossible that a boat could have floated into it.

BITTER WATERS

We came to the shore. Kittiwakes, gulls and wild swans rose flapping from the sand. I could not see the boat. The wind ruffled the water surface softly. The old lighthouse keeper pointed with his finger into the depths. "It lies there." And it lay there, fairly hard to see, a black speck on the white sand. Two yards of water and more covered it. "We've got sail and tiller above!" the man said. "Three years ago a storm washed it over the bank."

"Twenty marks?"

We had brought blankets, a sack of provisions and a bottle of schnapps. Chiquita cooked potatoes over a driftwood fire. It blazed magnificently. The schnapps was not meant for us.

We bought the boat with the bottle of schnapps and gained with it the good will of the lighthouse men.

Empty petroleum barrels and cord and tackle! The cord and the tackle hung over our shoulders and we kicked the barrels rolling before us to the little creek. With the tiller and sails of our boat we built a tent. The night was cold. We had only one blanket between us and that was too short above and below whatever way we wrapped it

BITTER WATERS

about us. We slept on the warm ashes of our fire. A wonderful dawn. Before sunrise the horizon was a thin green line and the sails of the ships beyond wandered slowly against the cloud banks and the slow smoke plumes of the steamers below. The sun rose. Chiquita made cocoa and inside and out our bodies warmed. The water in the little creek lay motionless and we could see the boat fairly plainly. Our boat it was that we saw.

I proofed the barrels, bound them with cord and threw them in the water. I stood on the bank naked and shivering. It had to be done—seaman's luck. A deep breath and a sudden dive. Salt water burned in my eyes. I held fast to a thwart and rapped my knuckles against the boat's timbers. She felt sound and tough. She lay upright and an anchor rope hung from the bows and the anchor lay half buried in the sand. A drag anchor with four flukes.

A plunge up to the surface.

The second time I took a cord with me, bound one end to a barrel that floated above and drew the loose end around a thwart and brought it to the surface again.

"Pull, Chiquita." Together we pulled. The

BITTER WATERS

boat did not budge, but the barrel sank. It strained and struggled to get clear of the cord but it had to go! We pulled until it sank under water flush with the gunwale. Then I dived again and while Chiquita hung on to the line on the shore above I bound it tight below. At the fourth dive I brought up the anchor and at the fifth the cord of a second barrel was passed under the after thwart.

Towards midday all my body had gone blue but three barrels lay under water. Slow bubbles rose to the surface, a sign that the barrels were not too watertight. We had to hurry that they might not lose all buoyancy.

I fixed the mast, an easy burden for one man, into the shoe on the keel and it stood firm. We fastened a line to the mast tip above water and hauled on it to loose the boat from the sand bed. Slime oozed up. Below water there was movement but we could not see through the thick slime what movement it was. The mast jerked and slanted suddenly backwards in the water. A miniature water spout rose up and we saw the fat belly of a barrel floating on the surface. Now we must hurry so as not to lose our advantage. The

BITTER WATERS

bows had loosed from the slime and reared straightly just beneath the surface.

The water was too thick with slime below so I dived and shovelled sand and slime from the boat with both hands. I rose again to the surface, bursting with joy and breathlessness. "It's coming, Chiquita, coming. I've shovelled out a ton of mud."

By evening three barrels floated on the water surface and as their bungs now lay above water I need have no fear that they would sink in the night. The boat hung horizontal close beneath the surface. We tested her from top to bottom. She was leaking but not too badly and the hull was sound.

Deep asleep, ten hours of wonderful sleep.

We had her out. We wedged the anchor against driftwood piles and made her fast with the tackle. And then hand over hand and inch by inch we dragged her to the shore on rollers. Now when she lay high and dry and we could view her from all sides I saw that the old tub was nigh on an hundred years old. She was wide and of an extraordinary roundness and more resembled a wash

BITTER WATERS

tub than any vessel that floats in water. It was a wonder that the sand had not crushed her ribs. The wood must have been good timber.

We bought a bucket of tar from the lighthouse men and a couple of folds of old sailcloth. When the boat dried she shewed many a crack in her ribs. Chiquita boiled the pitch and I clapped the tarred cloth over the cracks and nailed it tight with sheet tin. I would have liked best to paint her white like a yacht but the lighthouse man said it was not worth while. The boat lay black as a pirate ship and sucked the pitch thirstily into her old timbers. It lay on the sand proudly with upright mast as though eager to be sailing. She did not know how far from the sea she lay.

Two kilometres. Two kilometres of sand. Two kilometres in two days. I would take no help from the lighthouse men. We had no money. With anchor and tackle we hauled our boat inch by inch, hand over hand out to the open water. Every fifteen metres the anchor had to be taken up and made fast anew with driftwood. Every couple of paces a new roller had to be laid in front of the boat and the bows raised. Two kilometres

BITTER WATERS

inch by inch, twelve hours long for two days. Our hands could no longer grip the rope for the pain. I sang at the work like the bos'uns sing on ships: "Ho-ho-ho—heave-ho—heave-ho—she's easing now—she's coming—ho-ho-ho."

What a feeling! We sat there in our own boat as deep in the old round tub as in Abraham's bosom. She rode high and looked tall in the water. She still leaked in two holes but Chiquita could manage that with a jam tin. The sail swelled, a sprit sail with a sprit boom, it swelled to the wind. I could hold her no longer. We left the shallows and cast anchor. We loaded the boat full with driftwood. Revenge for the two kilometres of sand that had tortured us. Revenge for the creek's cold, deep waters: we hauled up the anchor. We sailed. The surge of water at our own boat's prow was marvellous to hear.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMER. The nights were bright. Sometimes we scarce slept. At night when the stars still gleamed in the heavens we sailed to the forest. The wind was calm until three in the morning. I carried the blankets into the boat still warm from our bodies, rods and lines, oil, bread, butter and salt. I carried Chiquita to the boat and placed her at the tiller. The anchor was hauled in over the prow and the boat left the creek clear of the reeds. I rolled the sail from the mast and hooked sprit boom above and below. A sprit is the most comfortable sail in the world. I clambered aft and took the sheet in my hand. Chiquita gave up the steering. She smiled a little mockingly at the slack sail and the lazy wind. The boat crawled slowly over the grey water and the morning mist that rose from it.

"Sleep." Chiquita wrapped the blankets about her, leaned her shoulder against the mast and watched the meagre colours of the morning sky,

watched the little pennant at the masthead flutter, droop and sink. She heard me whistle to entice the wind and slept.

Beyond us the flat shore glided slower and slower with increasing distance. The sun rose and pierced the pores and rents in the old brown sail and with the sun came the morning breeze. It came across us and just high enough for the boat to catch. I loosed the bolts from the lee board and the big board went rattling down. The sail stood stiff and beneath there was a booming and surging. The little waves beat fast and resonant against the bottom of the boat as though fingers drummed on the curved wood of a big fiddle. The lee board began to tremble. It began to sing in all its wood as ever faster it cut the water. The boat heeled to port. The sail stood full but so high in the wind that the after leech began to rattle. I changed places at the tiller and sat on the weather gunwale, feet clamped under a thwart with as much of my body leaning out over the side as I could to keep balance. Chiquita awoke from her second sleep. She blinked at the clouds, pleased with the swiftness of the voyage.

Midday. The shallows were an enormous leaden platter and the water thick and tough. We felt how the seaweed had tangled around the lee board baulking our speed and in our keel water trailed long green streamers. We shipped the board and drew a line under the boat from prow to stern to clear the seaweed. The strip of coastline ceased to move and the wind slackened. We were in a maze of little islands, risen from the ballast sand of the ships that a hundred years before had ridden here in winter anchorage. They were overgrown with grass and juniper. The tide ran through the narrow channels between the islands—good fishing waters. Herons dotted the creeks and stood on the sandy bottom in companies of four and five. They were fishing. They barred the inlet to the creek and drove the fish to its furthest point from whence there was no escape. Their long beaks pierced the shallow waters like lances and their slim necks tossed the glittering fish high in the air. The fish flashed down through the air and slid head foremost into the gaping beaks. The necks jerked like a cracking whip and the fish disappeared. The herons eyed the sail

BITTER WATERS

that glided between their islands and smelled danger, retired with hesitant springs and wide refreshing wing-beats.

It grew warm in the midday sun and the pitch melted in the cracks and leak holes. With the tiller gripped fast with my naked toes and the sheet between my teeth I stripped my shirt. Chiquita wore a thin sailor's jersey striped with blue and white, and its cotton fabric was as light as a swimming costume. She wore the wide faded trousers of my blue slops. She looked like a ship's apprentice.

The forest stretched before us like stripes of blue, peopled by none but animals. We headed the boat into the wind and let it run into a creek. The water surface flattened. We drew up the lee board. We looked curiously into the water. The bottom was white sand, and indented and ribbed like gums. For kilometres its width ran so shallowly that even a child could not have drowned in it.

We must ground somewhere—a sudden jerk and the bows thrust upwards and I let the sail flutter down and the stern swung sideways. We lay fast, three hundred metres from the forest in

BITTER WATERS

a creek with sandy shores and little islets of reed. We cast anchor. The sun blazed. We were dried with wind and soaked with sunlight. We bathed. The water was just deep enough for swimming. The boat swayed in the gentle ripples. We lay on our backs and floated. Then we ate.

I wound the sail about the mast and fastened it. We hung our boots round our shoulders with the laces knotted and waded to land. The forest was virgin. Great storms had bowed the highest trees against which the wind had beaten like a sail and ripped their roots from earth and as their crowns crashed down in the undergrowth they had smashed to earth all smaller trees about them. Rank ivy that had sucked its nourishment from their trunks lay on the earth like tangles of pulped snakes. The wood was never gathered. It lay there rotting in a riot of fungus, white and brown toadstools with crimped edges. Brambles wound themselves about the roots. The torn earth had turned to swamp and brown water gleamed metallicly in the hollows over beds of rotting leaves. Reeds grew in long fringes along the shore. Large adders glided like whip lashes of lightning down the narrow tracks trodden by the game and

BITTER WATERS

bracken flourished to man's height. There were many deer and many wild boar. There were colonies of herons and sea eagles. The forest stretched thirty kilometres long and ten kilometres wide from plain to sea and at the sea merged into a waste of shifting dune. Juniper and birches fringed the forest edge. Incessant winds had bowed all plants inwards to the land and the trunks of crippled trees reared all deeply aslant marking the track of great storms. The cones that fall in winter had rooted rankly in the spring saps and formed an almost impenetrable undergrowth. There were spots along the dunes where the rank growth rose in regular elliptical islands and if you thrust it aside you saw it grew about the spar and ribs of wrecked ships driven inland by mighty storms centuries ago. There were houses in the village whose foundations lay in the bowels of old wrecks.

On every expedition along the strand we discovered things well worth the finding. Some were the object of especial search. Sometimes we wanted cases. There were excellent cases along the shore: whisky cases with zinc corners, tea

BITTER WATERS

chests with leaden linings, and apple boxes of thin tough citron wood. There were also polished woods: mahogany decanter cases, and rail baulks of ships. Our island lay in a windy corner and the sea swept everything from deck even if the ship escaped it.

The shore was littered with wreckage of every kind: stokers' wooden slippers, burned-out bulbs, shreds and rags of sails, old ropes, cork rings of fishing nets, dead fish (unhappily all rotten and unfit for eating). Among our booty we had an ocarina, the life-belt of an English steamer, a lace handkerchief, a stone-age hatchet, several log-books half erased and sand rubbed, tin canisters, a feather bed, coal cobs and newspapers. Reading matter was scarce, and I was always tremendously happy when I found a newspaper.

But there were other things on the shore of which none knew but Chiquita and myself. There were bernstein stones. Chiquita discovered them, Chiquita whose eyes were always searching for the tiny gay shells with which she studded all the window frames in the house. She thought at first the small gleaming semi-transparent stones were

BITTER WATERS

pebbles until I put one in my mouth and their taste and ringed hardness betrayed them for bernstein.

There were plenty of them in small pieces but we were happy when we found one the size of a walnut. Bernstein is wonderful stuff. We divided our collection according to their beauty in little bags. The most beautiful of all is dark as old honey with a surface finely polished by long rolling in sand. Some of the surfaces were so cleanly faceted that you could gaze into it as in the depths of deep still waters. We gathered especially all those of hazel nut size so that I could later bore them through with a glowing needle and fashion a necklace for Chiquita. One kind was yellow and looked as though filled with white smoke inside. Large pieces of this were easy to find. The worse the quality of the stone the thicker is the smoke inside. The worst of all were completely white and salt to the taste and when you bit the stone it cracked. Sometimes after a storm when the beach lay covered in seaweed the bernstein lay so thickly that we could fill all our pockets in a couple of hours. There were quite definite spots in which to search and they changed with the winds and

tides. In calm weather they lay under a certain kind of black shell, perhaps because they were of the same weight and were washed equally distant ashore. We often burned small pieces; the stone burned with a bright and rustling flame and gave off heavy odours, the smell of incense.

The game tracks were so narrow and the bracken growth so dense and high that we had to go in Indian file. Often I let Chiquita go in front of me. She walked from the hips and lifted her feet so high from the ground that her thighs rose to a right angle with her body and when she set foot to earth, almost gripping its softness with her toes, it seemed to me that the forest lay in tropic lands. But here the dramatic struggle of trunk and limb was against the wind's fury and there against the thick tough cacti snakes and the strangling embraces of the creepers. She walked on the tracks trodden by the game exactly as they walk out there when they balance on the fallen trees that lie across the swamplands.

Our harvest land lay in the forest clearings. I cut juniper to fashion excellent brooms and Chiquita unearthed the roots of forest flowers to plant in her garden.

I laid wires for rabbits in the good spots. I was sorry for them. They died a cruel death but we could not be vegetarians all the time and it is always better not to use a gun in a strange forest. I often thought of hunting rabbits with a bow and arrow. No keeper could find harm in that but Chiquita would have laughed at me more than I would like.

When evening came and we were fully laden with forest booty we trekked back to our boat, keeping our eyes skinned for the keepers. Once in the boat they could not touch us. Keepers are land soldiers and fear deep water. We sailed back to a ballast sand island. We took kindling with us. Chiquita had dug worms with a stick in the forest and I carried them in a tin box. We hauled the anchor ashore and built a fire. Chiquita boiled potatoes and concocted a vegetable of young nettles. I cast my lines. Two rods and an eel line, the rods to catch our supper and the line for the morning's breakfast. Fish bite best of all in the evening. A crane sought sleep on our island and screamed with rage at our fire and presence. The wild duck fled with singing wing-beats. The water became opaque and black and my float gleamed

red on its surface. I walked slowly along the shore with my rod to coax the fish. They had to bite; they must. The potatoes were simmering.

A bite—and then came the tension; was it a beautiful little pike sufficient for the two of us or a miserable little whiting with nothing but a backbone?

A broad banner of smoke fluttered up from our fire to the clear night summer sky. We gathered grass, great armfuls of grass for our bedding and sought a level pitch in the shelter of the trees and cleared it of hard twigs and stones. I brought the sail from the boat and let it lie as a slanting roof from the tree. A starry sky may be romantic but without a roof you wake wet and frozen stiff before the dawn. We wound ourselves in our blankets. "Good night, Chiquita."

CHAPTER VIII

LIGHT stood grey at the windows. No, I would not awaken. I wanted sleep, I must have sleep; very weary, all limbs stiff and heavy with that cursed rowing. Came home at two in the morning. Chiquita still asleep? I stretched out my arm and felt thick, tough hair and a warm neck, an almost searing warmth. She was there. That gave contentment.

Dozed. Now we could sleep long until the day broke. The end of October. Often it was not the daylight that waked us but the boom of the foghorn from the lighthouse, and with the grey fog wall rearing before the windows we had little desire to leave the blankets. What could we do out there in the fog?

But there was so much to do! We had to think of the winter and arm ourselves against its coming. And when there was fog and no wind for sailing there were at least potatoes to be dug, turf to be cut and wood to be split.

BITTER WATERS

I had arrived home at two in the morning with a load of wood in the boat. It had been hard to gather and I had missed the evening breeze. I tacked about with a slack sail under a cold moon. I froze and mist lay on the water and I hoped for wind. No wind came and I had to row. I began to row at ten in the evening. At one in the morning I saw the lights of the house. Chiquita must be awake. I shipped the oars and poled the boat through the shallow waters. I wanted to be home, to be with her, to spare her long waiting. The bow waters hissed as I thrust on the pole. The light blacked out as I neared and when I entered the room she was sound asleep.

Perhaps when she heard the splash of the boat it had calmed her and she fell asleep. Water carries the slightest sound great distances; hearing perceives further than the naked eye. Even now I could hear the creak of tillers and the rusty voices of the fishermen becalmed in the dead wind. Chiquita awoke. Her eyes were open. She neither stretched nor yawned and the only sign of her awakening were the opened eyes, large, quiet. She rose. She cast aside the blankets with a simultaneous movement of arms and legs. She

BITTER WATERS

tested the coldness of the air with the whole surface of her brown, naked body. At first she could not feel it; awakening from sleep the body gives out warmth, a layer of warmth lies between the body and the cold air. With sudden decision she rolled from the bed. She rolled in the very second she felt the cold air strike and she rolled to retain some warmth by movement. She dropped flat to the ground. A thick fleece lay at the bedside and she did not hurt herself. She lay in the thick fleece and rued the fact that she had risen. I watched her as I might watch a kitten playing a solitary game.

She rose with a little sigh and walked atiptoe on long naked legs to the washstand. The washstand stood very low because it was not actually a washstand but a large orange box. Chiquita dipped the sponge in water and rubbed it in soap. She looked angrily at the water as though astonished that it could be so cold and then with an expression of mingled anger and a sense of duty she soaped herself from head to foot. Little soap bubbles covered her skin from her heels to the hair at the nape of the neck and her eyes were

BITTER WATERS

tight shut and the little nose wrinkled. Then she washed the lather away with the sponge. Now her skin shone and seemed filled with light. She was beautiful, large and generous in all her movements. She did not see me.

She dried herself with extraordinary rapidity; her skin seemed to shiver and to insinuate itself into the voluminous towel. She slipped hastily into her dress, ran to the kitchen and lit the fire. While the water boiled she arranged her hair. Her hair crackled; even in daylight it crackled blue sparks. It was marvellously vital hair. Once on the "Hispanola" I tried to knot two strands together. I used the best and strongest seamen's knots I knew. They were no use. Like snakes the two strands wriggled apart of their own accord without even a touch of her hands.

Chiquita laughed at seamen's knots.

She laughed at all the strange preparations I made against the winter. She did not know what a northern winter meant. She lacked a feminine instinct: the urge to hoard food and warmth-giving things.

What could we hoard against its coming? I cut

BITTER WATERS

turf, channels of oily glinting water and the roots of the heather growth; below lay the tough dripping sods, only to be sundered with the sharpest spade. They dripped with water and I built them into tight piled stacks that they might dry. The dried sods I built into a stout wall along the house side. We would burn turf in winter.

All hopes that I had set on the garden were thwarted. We cut about two dozen head of cabbage, small and poor in quality. Two baskets of dwarfed fruit, apples, grown wild with lack of care and good soil and bitter to the taste as crabs. A small patch of sunflower bloom. Great green platters filled with white seed where the bird pecked the day long. The seeds were as sweet to the taste as young nuts but scarcely to be counted as provisions. We had to rely on the potatoes. I had made them a fine bed and we dug them with our hands and the spade. Chiquita's hands were stiff with cold and her hair glittered with water drops. As we worked the rain beat down our necks, cold hard rain.

We ended the work with a great bonfire of leaf and stalk. The flame shuddered before the wind

BITTER WATERS

and belched sparks with every sudden veering. The small potatoes we had thrown in the fire hissed and crackled in the heat. They burst; cores of yellow steaming flesh, odorous and salted with ash.

Our harvesting ended. November came.

All that remained to us were the fungi. Each fine day we sailed to the forest. We knew the places. We gathered them in baskets, fat stone-hats with smoothly brown, firm heads and strong appetising stalks. Their flesh is firm and nourishing as red meat. Beech fungus, the strangest of them all, slender as pillars and speckled like chrysalis, with half-oval heads. Their savour is especially delicate. Pepperlings, the violet among fungi, that grow hidden beneath leaf and cone but whose colour is so brilliantly red that they are immediately betrayed. Magnificent, grateful and small and you can eat them as you pluck them from the soil, entire and without waste. After every day of rain we sailed over the flats to the wide-stretching flattened meadowland, to the deserted marshland where none now set foot since the cattle could no longer find firm land to graze

upon. Champignons mushrooms grew there after rain. We had to stretch up as high as possible or even leap in the air to see the length of level stretch from above; then we could see the white specks. Or you smelled them out with your nose. The mushroom Champignon has the finest and most exclusive scent of all the fungi. The outer skin is like the softest of leather to the touch and the gills beneath are as delicately coloured as the bloom of dark poppies. The mushrooms spring from the ground a few hours after rainfall. They are an erratic, strange, almost uncanny fungus.

All that we did not immediately cook and eat we prepared for the winter. Chiquita cleaned them and I strung them with a needle along a thread and festooned them along the kitchen beams and they hung there both decoration and food. They shrivelled slowly and became dry and could be kept long.

December. I awoke cold in the night. It had turned dreadfully cold. Coming from the water I could hear the creak and crackle of the thin ice film that was forming on the flats, and far beyond the cry of the wild swans. I could not sleep. I

BITTER WATERS

thought of the severities of the winter that were yet to come and of the wood pile before the house, the turf along the wall, and the potato bed and the dried fungi. Could we live on that? I thought of our debts at the village store, of the petroleum we must buy and the milk and butter we must buy. Fishing was bad now in the icy waters.

I could not sleep. Chiquita slept soundly, noiselessly: I would not disturb her. I struck a match beneath the blankets; nothing awakes a sleeper more surely than the scrape of a match. The candle flickered. Everywhere there were cracks in the wall, cracks I could not find. Snow crystals gleamed on the windows. Winter had closed about the house and came ever nearer, ever more threateningly and we had but little means to fight against him. I felt for Chiquita beneath the blankets. She was tight wrapped in her sleeping bag and sweetly warm.

I rose softly, pulled on heavy boots and the old sheepskin. I raked two hot bricks from the stove and put them in my pocket. I carried a stove with me that guaranteed to give two hours' heat. I carried my old flint loaded with shot. The air was

thick with fog and white light filtered through. The moon hung invisible above the house. Great drifts of snow lay piled against the fence and a bulwark of snow against each trunk of tree. Miniature ice-floes creaked in the reed stems and somewhere in the distance a dog howled. The dogs froze and could not lie in their kennels. They howled at the moon and at the men and women warmly abed in their houses and at the groaning wood alive with creatures of hot blood and steaming breath and young deer with bloody fetlocks in the frozen snow. The dogs scented game and became wolfish in the bitter snow and the hollow rumblings of their empty bellies. On the shore, minute on minute the foghorn wailed. It wailed in its solitude. It stood on the shore on its heavy brick feet, a round riveted iron tank with a gaping maw. Icicles hung from its belly. A solitary automaton with a mechanism that made it wail when it smelled the fog's darkness. Every third month a man came to tend it. The lighthouse keeper had it easy. He sat warm and dry behind his tower's thick walls. He wore his blue glasses and gazed at the white glowing chalk lump which

BITTER WATERS

gave forth all brilliance. Slowly throughout the night the glass circles of the lens system revolved about him.

Outside, behind the black jutting land arms, behind the wall of frozen reed were the wild swans. There the water was smooth and there they gathered, runaways from the north fled before the cold. They swam in little circles through the icy water to prevent it freezing about them and chattered in unending frosted syllables of night, chattered of cold and hunger and great need: they never slept through the long night. They guarded against encircling ice, watchful, hard to shoot.

I waded to my boat. The ice cracked beneath my feet and I felt the coldness of the water through the leather; it was always a time of tenseness to wait and see if they were still proof against the water. I laid the flint across two thwarts and clambered in. A marvellous boat. She dared scarcely creak when she knew we were out on the hunt. I hauled on the anchor rope, glided over the bedded anchor and with the boat's momentum dragged it clear. It squelched softly and grey slime dripped from it in heavy slabs. I took the

BITTER WATERS

boat hook. The boat glided like a shadow and the swirl of waters at her stern remained firmly immobile as though cast in lead. I glided through great emptiness, in a round swirling tower of fog. I knew from the water's depth where the boat lay and could hold her proper distance from the shore and I steered her course to the crying of the wild birds beyond. Then the thin black lines of the jutting land appeared and I must sit motionless and drift. A wild bird's eye is keener than a man's and in fog a black boat shews plainer than a white bird. I sat on my hot bricks and waited. I sat with the flint in my lap, hands bared. I drifted towards the shore before the easy night wind slowly and still as a black cloudlet. Success depended on surprise. Behind the reeds the birds cried with the harsh complaining voices of old women. They cried nearer. The reed fringe thickened and I saw the movement of single stems. Gliding—slowly gliding nearer—like a piece of driftwood gently swaying—nearer—quite near.

I felt the heat of the bricks beneath me so strongly that I thought it must betray me and beyond the reeds I saw the white wall of the shoreland rising softly and saw that it was all trodden

BITTER WATERS

and trampled by broad webbed feet. Inch by inch came near the strip of water between reed and shore; they were there. Great balls of white in the water. Some lay still as becalmed ships and some swam two by two with long, upright necks. One reared from the icy water and flapped its wings. Two, three pairs of dark wild duck were among them. The flint lay ice cold and heavy in my hands. I could not fire straightway. It is hard always to fire on these great birds, so beautiful and so tragic. The separating air trembled now so thinly that they must surely scent me; they no longer cried. Those with upright necks swam faster. A short harsh cry of alarm: the birds that lay like beached ships on the flat shore began to swim. The little ducks dived, trailing gleaming water behind them, and fled to the reeds. Now was the time: they were beginning to run. The placid water surface rippled into movement and became slashed with glittering trails. Now came the thunderous clapping of broad webbed feet beating water and the surge of air under mighty wings. I could no longer see nor think, my finger squeezed the trigger—a broad yellow flame and the slapping clatter of shot on the water surface.

A second flame spurt; and the next moment I felt relief that both barrels should really have fired. The surging cloud of white birds plunged up into the fog and flapped about me in a wide seaward sweep, but in the milky water a white speck swam in constricted circles, narrowing circles, smaller, ever smaller. The boat plunged surging under the pressure of the long pole towards the reed fringe and thrust aside the hard stems like a mighty breast; stopped hard. I sprang in the water and ran stumbling, almost falling, to the circling speck. A powerful wing-beat struck my arm. My hands gripped the long neck and forced it below water. The brute was powerful. I must strangle it under water. I strangled it with choking breath and disgust pulsing in my hands. It is a disgusting feeling to screw and twist the beautiful, powerful neck, white and muscular as a snake in your hands.

The dead bird lay on the for'ard thwart. The neck hung limply over the gunwale and trailed in the water. My bricks were almost stone cold. The boat sped homewards under the long pole's pressure. If I had money I would never again strangle swans under water with my hands. There

BITTER WATERS

are iron traps. You place them in shallow water and bait the trap plate with turnip or oak apple. Then the iron arms accomplish that which my hands must do. It is better to murder in comfort if murder you must.

CHAPTER IX

I WAS alone in my room. Chiquita slept. I hoped she was sleeping, so late in the night it was. I lay stretched on an old camp bed and the light of my lamp gleamed yellow behind the scorched glass. The lamp stood on a little tripod. I read a book—I thought I was reading a book.

I was alone. I lay in dreadful solitude. I had lost all feeling of forces or balance and could no longer tell what was dream and what reality. The camp bed might whirl me aloft like the gondola of an airship. Sometimes I heard the voice of an old man speaking in my ear and I heard him read page after page with furious haste through crackling lips and sometimes his voice gave phrases a peculiar intonation that made them lose all meaning. He told me the word “man” was but another word for “murder”—

I could not understand him. I opened my eyes and closed them, closed them and opened them. When I opened them I tried to see keenly, to see

BITTER WATERS

exactly the things I knew to be about me. My old sheepskin; it was dirty and the fleece was yellow and matted and the skin side painted field grey. I had sewn huge pockets there with tremendous stitching, one of leather and one of felt. The skin was a sort of home to me, it was saturated with my own smell and I could bury my face in it and awake memories through the smell of it. It was cold in the winter of '18. I was weary on sentry at night and I almost slept as I paced the creaking snow of my beat and I blinked at the icy moon and the clock struck the quarter hours so slowly. My cartridge belt hung heavily. God knows why I always packed it so tightly with ammunition, but I was a young soldier then with a smooth stupid face. Sixteen; I did not need to shave. Then my sheepskin made me merry and happy and the fleece was hard when I buried my face in it. Then it had smelled of other soldiers; it smelled of cold sweat and blood. The man was dead who had worn it before me. Then, at the beginning, I took off my steel helmet at nights and hung it over my arm. It gave me a headache; I was not yet used to it. The sheepskin smelled of all the ships I had sailed and of all the ship-

BITTER WATERS

mates who had shared it with me up there in the icy nights in Swedish shoals, in the dangerous Swedish waters where we loaded white planks for Australia, where we kept masthead watch both night and day and where it was so cold that the iron rungs of the ladder tore the flesh from our fingers. The sheepskin had warmth and to spare for all.

The old woollen blankets were stretched tight over the sea grass mattress. How often had I washed them and boiled them in a bucket of soda and soft soap. The sweat and colour and coal dust I had washed out of them and how my body had tossed in them in the hot nights when the prickly wool tormented my chafed skin. The stinking, stumbling little wash-house always full of steam on my wash day. How slowly they dried at first and how it became easier when nearly all the wool was washed out of them. Now they were quite clean but still redolent of memories. There were too many memories in my brain. I could see them with torturing exactness. I could tell them to none nor even to Chiquita just as she could not tell me of the visions in her head.

From the ceiling of my room the ship's models

BITTER WATERS

I had built hung on thin invisible strands. I had plenty of time then and I made them exactly as their originals even to the blocks. When I looked at them I could see and hear every face and voice, remember each peculiarity of my shipmates and at each point on the ship I remembered the work I had been about there. On the "Sebara" I had painted the whole foremast singlehanded and on every ship I sailed I had painted in the name anew and the depth figures above the waterline. I was a good painter. Since those days I had built only one model, a three masted barque I christened by the name "Chiquita."

I listened—the steps creaking? Was that, I wondered, a gentle breathing before my door and could I feel naked feet crossing the floor, freezing, naked feet? No, nothing there. The cat whined at the door.

I let her in. She squeezed her wide head through the narrow opening with a little contented purr. She pattered over the mat and her eyes narrowed in the lamplight. She sprang on the bed asking my consent with a glance of the narrowed eyes and curled herself into a warm ball and purred and slept.

The lamp flickered. The night stood dark and windy outside the square glass panes and tree branches thrashed the wall. Night upon night the wind whistled and the storm shrieked that winter was come. The endless nights and the cold pierced through the wall cracks like sharp-toothed venom. The ashes in the little stove snarled and rattled and eddied whirling along the skirting of the roughcast walls and flame licked the sodden logs. The walls shuddered under the drive of the wind and the roof jerked. To-morrow I must nail it fast. The wind—what does the city-dweller know of the wind? They walk upright along paved ways. We here became bent and crooked as the bushes that creep and grow along the earth because they cannot thrust upwards in their growth. We crouched into the wind like crouching athletes and our skin burned with the fierce needles of rain and cracked and reddened under hail.

How to live in the house through the long winter, without money, without thick, tight walls and coal? How should a creature like Chiquita live?

I hoped she was warm there below in her little bed; I hoped that she was sleeping—I did not

BITTER WATERS

know. Often she would lie for hours, eyes closed, motionless, and yet not sleeping. I would listen but there was no difference in her breathing whether she slept or waked. She lay tight folded in the blankets, rolled in them, her face pressed downwards and I could only see her black hair. She shivered. There was little warmth in her frail body. Often when she had crawled into bed I heard the chattering of her teeth endure.

Perhaps at that very moment she was not abed. That might well be. Perhaps she was outside with naked feet and naked under her long white shift, running over the wet meadow grass. Why did she do that? I could do nothing. She wept when I ran after her, when I begged her to wear a coat and turned dumb and obstinate when I forced her to the house. She would stand quietly on the shore and watch the lighthouse beam sweep over the sea and beat against the flattened land. She watched the whirling sand gleam like star dust when the beam enclosed it. She thought of the birds, eyes blinded by the white sudden jet from the lenses and thought of the seagulls, white, screaming, air-tossed rags, rushing in utter thrall

BITTER WATERS

to the white beam's core to dash themselves against the net of steel invisible to their dazzled eyes.

I thought that it was of these things she thought.

Or she ran, ran as quickly as she could until far beyond and she could no longer breathe and could feel the salt blood in her mouth, and her weight of woe no longer choked her. Then she would return quite slowly and quite placidly. Eyes told more than lips. I could not help her.

If only she might not sicken with cold.

Sometimes as I ranged the forest—often I went there alone to gather fungus and wood or to look at the rabbit snares in the dunes at the forest edge—and I returned home at the failing of the light, alone and deafened with the tide's roar, lost in thought, but happy that I would soon see the gleaming windows of the house and the light of the kitchen window where Chiquita worked so deftly in her sprigged apron, often I found footprints in the sand, the print of tiny shoes. The first time that I saw them they astounded me as the naked footprint of the savage astounded Robinson Crusoe. I never could become used to them—whose feet in all the island were so small as those but Chiquita's? What impulse could have

BITTER WATERS

driven her to follow me? And why in doing it had she hidden from me so that I might not see her?

I did not know whether she was asleep below there. I did not know whether she lay warm or shivering. I did not even know whether she still was in the house. I lay solitary in the room I had made my own. I lay lost in thoughts and memories and no longer knew what was dream and what reality. I conjured up my ghosts.

Why was I not below asleep at my wife's side? It would not help. It would help neither her nor myself. No man could take from her the burden men had put upon her. Helplessness is a bad thing for any man. The cat purred in its sleep. I laid aside the book I had not read. The grey hand of the new day clutched at the window.

CHAPTER X

PIECE by piece she spoke to me of "before," sometimes only in three words and then long silence but after months her story took shape and form. I saw it clearly: the little negro township in the southern parts of Central America—a fruit port. A few whites lived there, mainly Dutch. This means that the colour bar is less strictly drawn than elsewhere in the tropics. I know what that leads to—a man comes from Europe, a failure at his job or may be straight from a jail. Let us say he is an engineer or carpenter. He leaves the ship, stumbles over the rail lines on the quay and finds his nose already stuck in the jungle. He finds little work at his trade but a hell of a climate. Nothing is as he imagined it at home. A man like that cracks up easily, especially if he's no longer young. And he goes to pieces all the quicker if he is a decent man, if he is willing to live by working at his trade. Mostly he learns too late that it cannot be done, when he has not

BITTER WATERS

the money for the voyage home. But the most of them—those whose spirit and strength have already been broken at home do not put up a long fight. The man, the father of my little woman, was one of those. I saw an old photograph: it was spotted with salt water and the corners were bleached. The verandah of a bungalow: beer bottles on a table. A pallid man with a big black beard sat at the table and held a Dutch newspaper in his left hand. Pencils were stuck in the breast pocket of his duck tunic and two children in rather dirty knitted frocks squatted in a corner. The picture was obviously posed and packed with every available symbol of European civilisation—beer bottles, newspaper, knitted frocks and pencils.

What does a man do when he cannot live at his trade? The Europeans help one another. He is given a small post in the customs or police. I think in his case it was the police. The government gives money, a part-worn uniform, a little authority over the natives and sends him into the interior to some outlying station. He is given a house, a kind of bungalow such as the richer half-castes live in. The house is unfurnished. He must furnish it. The Chinese trader or the Jew

BITTER WATERS

or whoever happens to be on the spot lends him the money. He also procures him furniture from the nearest dealer—at double profit. He procures the things for the kitchen, the bedding—all to be paid off in instalments. And the payments are so arranged that he cannot pay them from his salary, so that he must remain in perpetual debt.

A white man cannot live alone in a house in the tropics. He needs a servant, male or female. If he is not married it is ten to one that he takes a housekeeper. The moneylender spares him the trouble and delivers one with the furniture. The women are called baboes and are a definite system and the man must adapt himself to the system. They are all natives, negresses. When they are young they are pretty. A man can take his pick. That the man who is wifeless sleeps with her sooner or later is inevitable and he can think himself lucky if he gets nothing worse than children from her. In nine cases out of ten they have some form of venereal disease—a legacy from former white masters. This lasts its time and time in the tropics speeds swiftly until he begins to drink, even if he has not already taken to it. What else is there for him to do? The heat

BITTER WATERS

swathes his brain with torpor and indifference and the trader delivers cases of bottled beer without question, a guilder a bottle. The man does not drink from thirst, no drinker drinks from thirst. He drinks from homesickness. And when somewhere out there in the jungle he sees the bottles on the verandah—beautifully cold inside the wet woollen stockings that evaporate the heat—and when he sees the beautiful froth and the bubbles winking at the brim he feels that he might be sitting in his cool homeland in his favourite saloon and he talks to himself, card-playing phrases and scraps of neighbourly chat. He has nothing else to hold on to. He has nothing common to share with the baboe—he can only sleep with her, not talk with her. She does not understand his tongue nor he hers and her strange blood revolts him in his strong unconscious urges. Children arrive. The feelings of a white man towards his half-caste children are torn and mixed. He loves them and hates them. He loves them because all men love their children, and hates them because they only half belong to him and because he knows they are despised by his own caste. These children never form the tie that unites a family. They are

a reason to be rid of the woman who has borne them. But that is difficult, for behind the baboe is the trader who delivered her, and behind the trader is the law and in the law's eyes all are equal.

And so he drinks from despair. He drinks because of his solitude, because of his life, because of the debts he never can repay, and as he drinks the debt increases—so long as the credit lasts. The trader knows exactly: a white police official, a customs man is worth so and so much and not a penny more. That is his rule.

As I have said, I saw it all clearly: the cluster of half-caste bungalows. The undergrowth beneath the palms has rotted and there are hens and a couple of pigs. The sky hangs clear and visible only over the parade ground and the roofs of the government buildings. Refuse and tin cans litter the rickety fencing of the houses. The baboes, the frowsy slatternly nigger women, throw all their rubbish through the doors and the dogs and cats drag everything edible into the dankness of the piles on which the houses stand. The air is like a hot house in which carrion rots. Up a couple of steps and you stand on the hollow sounding veran-

dah planks. The baboe pushes the matting curtains aside and you can see her gleaming eyes in the half darkness. She shrinks back. The baboes are always afraid when another white visits their man. He might take him away. The man himself comes in his suit of dirty white drill, unshaven for weeks, hair matted and the silver tunic buttons all undone. He goes barefoot when he can—a bad sign in a white. He has lost all hold then. He is tremendously excited when a visitor arrives, he remembers then that he is white and endeavours to demonstrate it. He kicks the children for instance and shouts out “black bastards, darned whore’s spawn” so that none shall imagine for a moment that they are his children. He claps his hands and out waddles the baboe submissively with a case of beer. And then he always finds occasion to abuse and curse her to shew the stranger that there is no mistake about the proper way to treat a nigger on this station. But when no strangers come and he cannot drink despair away at home he goes to the nigger saloons, to the bare and miserable wooden huts and stands alone at the bar with the niggers squatting silent on the bench along the

wall and he drinks and chatters and brags and hammers his pistol butt on the bar and brings ignominy on his race.

Such a man was Chiquita's father.

There were cats in the bungalow. There were cats everywhere but the cats in the white police bungalow were tame. The little girl who crawled about the verandah, brown, barefoot and nearly naked in her dirty shift, had tamed them. The cats, she felt, were the only creatures in the world who loved her. She felt that she was the mother of the cats. She had found them one day, newly born, blind and whimpering under the verandah and where it was so dark and so narrow that she could scarcely move. She had stretched out her finger to the little creatures, so warm and groping like caterpillars in their movement. Suddenly two green eyes glazed. The mother had come, a dead bird in her mouth. She dropped the bird and snarled. Both were scared, both the cat and the little girl. It was a tense meeting, exactly like an explorer meeting a lion in the African jungle but this meeting was the herald of friendship. The old cat was given a name. She was given

BITTER WATERS

milk stolen for her from the kitchen. And the little kittens were given names. The cat carried the kittens into the house for the first time. She carried the smallest in her mouth and the other pressed about her body and under her body uttering tiny mews. The man in the dirty white uniform looked up from his newspaper angrily. He took a sack and coaxed: puss, puss, puss. And before the old cat could see what he was about he had slung all the kittens but two into the sack.

None but the cat and her two kittens loved the little girl. Not the father, because she was not "his child" as he said because of her dark skin. Not the mother because she had only wanted the child as a weapon against the father. But the cats loved her. She took the kittens with her in her bed and cuddled them and slept with them and when she slept she did not notice that the old cat came purring to the bed and took the little creatures by the neck and that then they curled themselves as in their mother's womb.

When Chiquita's mother screamed and flung the hot suds from the kitchen over the verandah where she played, she fled with the kittens underneath the verandah. She crouched in a corner and

took comfort from their soft warm fur and their pretty games and comic movements. Then she no longer cried even when she was especially sorry for herself because some young nigger blew pepper in her face.

One day the missionary came visiting to the verandah. The little girl had played near the table with the beer bottles. Then she had hidden. She felt all the coldness of the glances that fell upon her and knew that they were speaking about her and that the words were inimical words. And later when she came back to the verandah her father sat alone. He was moodier and drunker than usual. The missionary had been reproachful about his way of life. He was furious; the baboe had hidden herself when he flung a beer bottle at her head. The little girl climbed the verandah steps with bare, noiseless feet. She carried her big black cat tightly in her arms as a shield and buckler as it were and the black cat looked back over her shoulder at the kittens gambolling behind with little uncertain springs.

And the moody, choleric, decayed and semi-drunken European had to wrinkle his brows and watch, half against his will, the idyll enacted at

BITTER WATERS

his feet: his little daughter playing with the kittens.

Peculiar processes are at work in the heart and brain of such a man as this. He was excited and the blood in his veins boiled with rage and shame and alcohol. But the missionary who had said so many unpleasant things was gone now. Now he saw for the first time how charming was his child and how tenderly she played and how beautiful is a happy child. A feeling akin to emotion and paternal tenderness came over him but the feeling was mixed with the fury that was in him. He was furious with himself, with the wealth of childish love that he had squandered because he had never noticed it. The loss of love, the irrevocability of all that he had missed, threw him into a kind of desperation. He could find no outlet for the torrent of rage within him. He was half minded to vent it on the child because she played with the kittens instead of with her father. It was jealousy, baseless—the worst kind of jealousy. The child did not see how his brow wrinkled ever deeper, how he leaned forward and how the blood mounted to his head.

"Don't touch the cat, she's lousy," he yelled suddenly.

The child was transfixed with terror and could not understand. She had always been let play with the cat. Nor did the cat understand the danger that threatened but purred maternally in the child's arms to her young ones.

The contented purring, the cat's sweetness and motherliness—exactly all the qualities lacking in his baboe—these were the sparks that exploded his fury. He sprang up and the little girl screamed with terror and held the cat like a muff before her face. That was a big mistake for the cat could have fled had she not been held so tightly. The man's rough paw, as large as the child's face, grasped the cat by the neck and lifted it before his face. With the other fist he thumped into the twisting trembling body. But his fist met with no real resistance in the slim body and the claws of the stiffly outstretched paws ripped his skin. All remnants of sense had now vanished from his red bloated face but sufficient there was for him to know how a cat should be tortured. He clutched one of the sacks that always lay on the verandah, thrust the cat inside and twisted the neck

BITTER WATERS

of the sack. He meant to drown the beast but suddenly that was not enough—its death must be seen. The child must see what happened when it disobeyed its father, see what happened when a child loved a cat more than its own father.

“Now see, you carrion, now see!”

A terrible dread ran icy needles through the child's shuddering body: she saw. The big raging man stood like a suddenly lunatic tower between the pillars of the verandah steps. He swung the sack, the twitching jerking sack, through the air as though he would let it fly; but he smashed it with a dull thud against the left-hand pillar. A dull thud and splitting thunder in the child's wild beating heart. The sack twitched and jerked more wildly than ever before and twisted as it rose again and as it smashed the second time there came muffled searing shrieks. The little girl could not move. She was transfixed with terror and she held her little hands pressed to her ears and the thin fine hair at the curve of the brow stood out awry and she bit into the tight dirty plait with the little slide. And the raging monster smashed and smashed the sack against the pillar and the wailing in the sack seemed eternal. Time became a fiery

glowing stake thrust and turning an eternity in the heart. And so it went on until the sack burst and a bloody black body flew out over the grass and lay there still and motionless.

When night came the little girl was not to be found. The baboe yelled—she listened and said that somewhere she could hear whimpering—but it might be nothing after all.

The girl was squatting in the corner under the verandah with the cat. The cat had crawled over the grass with blind groping movements just as newborn animals do, almost like a caterpillar. She had crawled to her corner and behind her crawled the little girl, eyes wide with fear, quite slowly and on all fours almost as though she were imitating each movement of the cat. The cat crouched in the darkness, she crouched with her head sunken and a limp backbone. Little trickles of blood ran slowly from the corners of her eyes and from her nose. The beautiful black fur was dull and matted. She lay as though frozen in congealed blood. The tail had a crick and she stared dully and apathetic at the ground. Her green eyes shone no longer but were dim as lanterns in fog. The slow beating of her heart ran

BITTER WATERS

in little ripples along her fur. Her heart had pushed itself close beneath her fur. That lasted for an hour. The little girl did not dare to touch the cat. She did not dare to speak. She was still transfixed with terror. Then slowly she crawled with stiff limbs to the kitchen and then crawled back. A helping thought crossed her mind and she ran, now she could run again, to the bungalow and stole milk, but as she did it she never thought that she was stealing milk. She carried the bowl in both hands and slid it tremblingly before the cat. The cat did not stir. She still stared dully at the ground before her. Her body began slowly to twitch and roll as though she would turn over. She felt nothing more. Tenderly the child tried to press the head towards the milk, to shew her that milk lay before her.

The cat's nose now hung in the milk but nothing stirred. As though the cat had ceased to breathe, there was no movement of the milk's surface. The little girl sought other means to help it. She dipped her fingers in the milk and stroked them lightly over the matted blood-soaked fur. She had a feeling that the force of her deep love must heal the cat. She had altered so dread-

fully. Her backbone was become a sharp serrated ridge and at some places where the child's fingers passed gently over the body, the cat whimpered softly and complainingly. The little girl did not know how many bones in the tortured body were broken but she saw that the cat must surely die.

The cat swayed slowly to and fro and her heart beat under the girl's small hand, passed beneath the body as support. The girl's heart beat the same warm measure and both of them cowered motionless as though they were dead. Again a long time passed. Then the cat began to tremble in all its body; it was trembling with the coldness of death. She sank together and looked strangely hollow as though sucked out and could no longer rise. The little girl thought the cat was cold with the milk which she had used to clean its fur and with a corner of her frock she sought to rub its fur quite softly just to give it warmth. But the cat whimpered. A white liquid and no longer blood trickled from its eyes.

The little girl took the cat in her arms. She squatted on the floor. She laid her cheek against its fur and breathed all her warmth of breath into the limp body. The blood in her feet and legs

seemed drained away. It prickled her terribly but she did not dare move lest her movement should hurt the dying cat. Hour after hour she warmed it with her heart and breath.

She felt how its heartbeat grew weaker and how the limbs of the mangled body grew colder and colder. Big tears of exhaustion ran incessantly down her cheeks and an incessant choking sobbing shook her as the dying creature purred, no longer conscious of its hurts, and she tried to choke the sobs back again lest she should hurt it. The cat had been dead for many hours but the little girl thought it asleep—so came the morning.

CHAPTER XI

JANUARY 13th. A deal of wind. Sheer west. For three days now we have not been able to reach the village. Wherever the trees stand along the road it is six foot deep in snow. Maybe the meadows are passable but there is a lot of water. It is impossible to sail, too much wind, and against that, rowing is also out of the question. The boat lies outside and is galloping like mad. I am glad the anchor still holds her. The foam of the tide is rolling over the meadow right up to the house. The tide is high. If it continues like this the boat will smash up. The wind in the house is a misery. Smoke is pouring through the chinks of the stove tiles. The wind sucks all the heat up the chimney. Chiquita never leaves the stove. She presses first her back and then her stomach against the tiles and clasps the stove in her arms. But her hands remain red. I am sorry for her. We ought to have stayed the whole day in bed. The house does not give a lot of shelter

BITTER WATERS

now. The wet snow, driven almost horizontally before the wind, has completely soaked the walls. We have moved all the furniture away from the walls. If the frost comes now it will freeze a lot of bricks out.

January 15th. A big roof has just floated into us. Carried away from a house on the opposite shore. Boarding with a tarred surface. Useful material. I will try to get as many planks as I can so that I can board up the house on the weather side and then tar them. I think that it might help. I waded out to-day and had a look at the boat. Seaboats are useless now as the water is up to my hips and the waves ride it breast high. These flat waters have a terrific current. It simply carries you with it. So far the boat is still O.K. and I baled her. Then I headed her about—that sounds simple enough but I had to go into the water again. I could not manage it with the oars or boat hook any longer. I made fast the anchor line to the stern. I have to look after the old girl or she'll go to pieces. I towed the roof nearer in. There is nothing much left of the shoreland. The water has never been so high. If only the wind does not veer north.

BITTER WATERS

January 16th. To-day the wind has veered north. What to do now I have no idea. We are deafened with the wind, deafened with the incessant roaring of the surf and the cracking of the small ice-floes out on the meadows. It has turned icy cold but the flats cannot freeze because of the heavy current. We are both fairly apathetic and lie abed. The whole day it has been dark and the snow lies thick on the panes. The door passage is rammed tight with snow like a packet of wadding. The snow whirls in under the door and through the most minute of the holes in the wall. Ice gleams on the walls. It is cold in bed. Chiquita shivers underneath the blankets. To-day I have given up all hope of saving anything. The water is bound to rise now. Its taste has changed. I tried it—salt.

Five days the wind blew sheer west. Wind strength eight to nine. The storm has driven millions and millions of tons of water from the North Sea into the Baltic. And now sheer north. Heavy storm drives all the water before it towards this coast. Drives it into the flats. What can we do? Actually we can do nothing at all. It is all the same to us and we lie silent in bed. Our hope-

BITTER WATERS

lessness is not born of the storm and rising water. Perhaps it will be a good thing if the water does rise and put an end to this quite hopeless adventure. When the house collapses I won't need to see it again. This is a place for wolves and for men who can dull themselves with liquor and fisherwives with tarred bonnets.

Night: For two hours now the house has been filled with mice. Their terror makes them squeak quite shrilly. They scutter, they know that the water is coming but don't know where to find safety. The cat mews. She is desperate. She has eaten mice until her stomach revolted. Now she is afraid of so many mice; their fearlessness makes them uncanny. She thinks them mad and venomous. The mice are running over our beds—that is the main reason why we are up and about. I have been out with the stable lantern to see if the boat is still there. That seems to me the most important thing of all now. I can no longer open the door and when I open the frozen window the panes crack—it does not matter much now there is an end of everything. The surge of water is now frighteningly near. The waves are smaller and the wind has slackened. It is just as though

wind and waves are holding their breath with excitement. The roll of the little waves over the grass sounds strangely and the foam fringe thrusts itself rippling forward. Now it has crept within sixty yards of the house on three sides. The boat lies so far out that it seems to have floated away. Time to pack up. I must haul the boat in nearer. Go into the water. It reaches to the arm-pits. It is very cold and the rigidity of the approaching ice lies heavy in it. I had placed the lantern on the shore before wading out. When I came back with the boat, guiding myself by its light, she grounded with a jerk quite close to the lamp. The water had risen so quickly between my going out and coming in.

Time to pack up.

I rammed the anchor in the meadow earth. Chiquita is packing her old tin trunk. It is the first time I have seen it for a long time. In the meantime it has gone rusty. Chiquita stuffs her belongings in the trunk very casually and is quite unperturbed, perhaps happy. It strikes me how near all her things lie together; they have never been distributed about the house but have always occupied a very limited space. She has never

really unpacked them. The house is brightly lit; it has never been so festively illuminated as now when we need light in every room to gather our things together.

Towards two in the morning the water came through the boards in the ground floor. It does not disturb us as we pack upstairs. Only when I go down from time to time to hunt for something or other do I notice how it is rising higher about my feet. It is lapping against the walls outside and trickling through the brickwork, agleam in the lantern light. Still, dull, silently rising flood.

Towards three in the morning and we have nearly finished. Now it looks as it did when first we came. Only it is more cheerless now. Infinitely more cheerless. Our clothes are all worn out. For what? For that which absorbed all our strength for one long year: for nothing, nothing at all. How long must I go to sea now until we can buy some things again? Chiquita is sitting on her trunk. She has set the cat in her lap and is stroking it. I hammer the lid of a box with echoing blows. I hammer as loudly as I can. I must behave like a man and not like an old woman.

Four o'clock. The living room has suddenly

BITTER WATERS

filled with smoke. The rising water has reached the fire in the stove. Five o'clock. We are waiting. We have everything ready. We are waiting for the dawn. The boat is made fast to the door knocker. I did that as a kind of humorous gesture—

Towards half past six something happened—something I had never expected. A searchlight stabbed the darkness from the harbour over the shallows towards us. A long white arm: it trembled, flashed against the sky and groped among the stars. Marvellous: in spite of the rising flood there was still enough electricity to give power for such a beam. It sank on the water surface and groped forwards. One after the other the channel buoys appeared, pale and reflecting light as though they gave it forth themselves. The whole fairway was there; not one of the buoys had slipped its moorings. The beam began slowly to creep forward. The little steamer on whose deck it stood could not be seen in the blackness. We could only see light, impalpable light, that groped towards us. Seagulls hung like white handkerchiefs

BITTER WATERS

trapped in the beam. Suddenly some of the steamer's smoke wavered through the beam and then I knew, knew for the first time what my senses should long ago have told me—there were men there on a little steamer and coming to rescue us. It is good that men should help one another. We were not exactly in danger of death, but suddenly it seemed as though we were being "rescued." We stood at the window. My heart felt soft and quite touched. Our thoughts were all about the little steamer. We could picture it exactly: the fat captain with little boozy bulging eyes, the engineer who polished the steamer's abundant brass so highly and who yet forgot to stoke his engine so that often it came to a standstill out there on the flats. The old sailor with the scanty whiskers—and God knows who else besides, all come with the steamer to rescue us. It was warm on the steamer, the engine warmed the whole ship. They had coal, plenty of good steam coal in enormous cobs. The cabin was dry and a beautiful petroleum lamp burned inside. The red plush seats were fine and soft . . .

She was coming—we heard her soft—bum-bum-

bum—over the water, the good and friendly bum-bum-bum of the engine—she was coming.

She drifted slowly towards us. Her lights swayed. A rusty, boozy voice growled over the echoing water: "Ahoy!"

"Steamer ahoy!"

CHAPTER XII

I HAD drawn my number. Seaman No. 1458.

A voyage begins like that. First you draw your number from the office and then you go there twice a day, ten to twelve in the mornings and three to four in the afternoons and you wait there until your number is called. As soon as it is called you ask for the ship. The ship is a matter of luck, she may be going to Australia or the West Indies, she may be a liner or a coal boat. The ship is accidental and to the most of us it is quite immaterial where she is bound.

I lived in a little saloon. Chiquita lived in a room, with a landlady. Chiquita had a room and I lived together with three other seamen above the saloon. You have to live in the saloon if you want a ship quickly because a seaman can only learn there what he has to know of ship movements. The saloon itself is a kind of ship. A fine ship for seamen. Sea-faring must always be like that. I must have altered for I used to

BITTER WATERS

think the saloons fine places. Now I saw through the saloon system for the first time, saw how the baldpate behind the bar had his claws in each of us. His pop-eyes glinted hard. Actually he looked inside himself and was afraid of the fat that bulged up his neck and hung round his heart. His son worked in an office and his daughter went whoring with the ship's officers. He despised the seamen on whom he lived.

The breakfast he gave us was so extraordinarily vile that you had to order a kummel immediately to settle your stomach. And then you drank beer and kummel one after the other the whole day long. He was a heavy drinker. Not so much because he liked schnapps, but because it was good for trade. When he stood a round of drinks he did it because someone would have to stand another round, all in accordance with saloon law. Everything came back to him. No sailorman ever notices that; the sailorman thinks the saloon keeper is giving something away when he stands a drink, that he is giving something away when he puts a groschen in the automatic piano. Sailormen never know that the saloon keeper has the keys of the piano and can take the groschens out again.

BITTER WATERS

There were plenty of ships in dock and I might be lucky.

In the evening I went to Chiquita. Who knew how long we would be together? She'd had a hard life for a long time and we ought to have at least one good night together.

The house she lodged in was a dreadful place. The first time I arrived there was at night, and I could scarcely find it again in its street where all the houses seemed to have festered into one big scab. A dead echoing cobbled street. Turgid air in which my matches burned with blue dull flame. It was a house such as men only know by night when they go with a street girl to her room. The iron key creaked with the same noise and it was the same foul air on the staircase where the matches flicker dully and the same creak of the steps and the same whisper: "Psst—don't make a noise."

And as I mounted the stairs I felt the same depression and melancholy as I used to feel then, exactly the same.

The old trollop, the landlady, with a lamp in her hand. She pulled an astonished face when I questioned her politely. For a moment I had

thought it a good thing to be polite for Chiquita's sake.

"Your wife?" She eyed me from head to foot.

"Yes, my wife."

Her face gaped open. "Annie—Annieeee."

At the end of the dark corridor a door half opened and a woman's bust bent into the light. She held the neck of her dress and hid her hips as though she were naked at the waist. I saw her face plainly—wrinkled brow, weary skin made white and soft with powder, black-ringed eyes and an angry annoyance in her features such as women have when called away from their gossiping. I saw how the light behind her gleamed through the yellow tousled hair.

I did not need to hear the boozy voice nor smell the reek of cheap perfume to know her for a dock-side whore. One glance was sufficient to know that.

And now:—now my lips tightened and my cheekbones turned hard as marble: a second woman stepped into the light. My wife!

We went out together. We walked together without a word. Not close. I am not fond of cheap scent. Chiquita did not seem to mind it.

Her gait was self-possessed, it was elegant and urban, the gait of a woman who knows she is wearing a becoming dress. Chiquita wore a dress that became her excellently. Rather a pity that it did not belong to her. It was lent to her. Annie had lent it to her because she knew Chiquita was going with me to a dance hall.

"You must change that dress, Chiquita!"

"Why?"

What could I reply to that? It was impossible that Chiquita did not know that the woman Annie . . . And if she knew and in spite of knowing could still coldly ask me "Why?" What could I say? I could say nothing because she could not understand. And if that was her way of thinking why should she ever leave the house where she now lodged?

These were sorry thoughts and they possessed me so utterly that I could do nothing but walk onwards at her side. We wanted to dance and suddenly we found ourselves before one of the enormous St. Pauli dance halls.

A stupendous place. Three distinct and separate orchestras on three distinct and separate dais playing one after the other without cease, one in green

BITTER WATERS

swallow tails and another in red and one in white shirts. The walls were enormous mirrors. Little *cabinets particuliers* were scattered round the walls and the crowd danced on the broad expanse of shining parquet between the orchestras. The lights flashed red and green and yellow and white. Sometimes the lights were all extinguished and then the girls squealed and when the lights went up again couples scrambled up from the floor.

We sat in a box and drank wine and we danced together, but I cannot say that my heart was in it. I was distraught and pensive, a rotten cavalier. I looked at Chiquita; that is to say I watched her from behind but I saw her none the less. She was lively and excited. She swayed to the rhythm of the dance. She rubbed her hands, she rubbed the remains of some skin cream into her hands, cream that was probably also lent to her by Annie. I had never seen her eyes sparkle so livelily. She was under some great excitement: the riotous crowd of the dance hall had made their impression on her. The abundant mirrors, the three orchestras and the lights. She pursed her lips sarcastically, when badly dressed or ugly girls danced by. At any rate the men did not seem to interest

her. Should that have comforted me? No—it did not matter at all to me whether the men interested her.

I was a bad and unattentive cavalier for my girl.

I danced little, actually only once. I had nearly forgotten how to dance. It was better the time we danced together in Tampico. I need not have wondered when someone came along and, bowing, asked Chiquita if she would dance. I merely nodded mechanically to the stupid red face with the protruding ears that confronted me. A seaman, a comrade. Why should not one of my comrades dance with my wife?

I watched the seething parquet bowl of dancers. I did not watch it properly but stared rather at the wall beyond. But I saw them sometimes as they swayed past me: Chiquita and the sailor. Her dark face was inclined towards the floor. She was watching out for her feet; she guided her partner with the delicate pressure of her little hands so that he might not tread upon her feet. She knew that most sailormen dance badly. She swayed past, marvellously soft and supple. How cool her skin seemed even in that hot room. She wore a beautiful dress. The man dancing with her was

BITTER WATERS

enraptured by her beauty. She attracted enough attention in the big dance hall, the first place in Europe to please her. Really I ought to have been proud of her.

She had risen as the seaman came to our table. Without a second's hesitation; silent. She had risen with a half-smile of politeness and of flattery and had danced.

Why should she not? Let her dance if she would with my comrades, with the sailormen. It meant nothing to me. I was not fond of dancing and if I wanted to dance, why then—there were always girls. Plenty of girls. As many as you like.

CHAPTER XIII

“WE’VE spent all our money on the Liverpool girls, hurrah!”

They went along hooked arm in arm! The men of the first watch of the “Empress of Ireland,” bound that night on a six months’ trip to the Dutch East Indies. Mac, Johnny, Peter, Bob, McQuaid and Glen, the deckhands Mick and Elgil and in the middle of them all, Tim the bos’un. They were coming aboard that night for the third time. Drunk as lords: “Had a bloody good time and don’t know anything else.” Now they wanted to board the “Empress of Ireland” at the coaling quay.

All roads to the docks lead downhill. Rain beat the smoke rising from the slum houses down to the wet pavements. Vomit pools spread under the lamps and water splashed in the pissiors. Standard oil posters pointed the way. The men found a dustbin and kicked it along before them. It clanged and rattled over the cobbles and lost its roundness. Each one tried to kick the biggest

bulge. Its clanging beat the measure of their song. "Another little drink, and another little drink, Another little drink wouldn't do us any harm—"

The ship's hulk sang under its weight of steam. The safety valves belched steam and the winches on deck belched steam, white whirling clouds. Structures, ropes and men at work flung enormous swimming shadows in the steam. The work hustled and the tide rose; the ship must sail, the ship must sail. Four rail lines lay over the deck and trucks stood on the rails. The engine whistled shrilly and the pistons thrust impatiently. The crane claws clutched the last truck and a stream of Cardiff coal hurtled down the chutes into the open bunkers. The coal stood heaped in the iron chambers like broad and mighty pines. Clusters burned above them, clusters of bulbs that swung incessantly. Shovels scraped; the dockers shovelled it aside. Black, growling, singing devils. Duck lamps gleamed on their shovel handles. And all drunk, drunk as all the men on deck were drunk when she was about to sail.

The doctor and purser sat on the second deck at a table complete with inkwells and papers. The crew filed slowly past them like criminals, arms

BITTER WATERS

upraised. That was the V.D. inspection. Gleaming signal lights burned from the bridge and masts. Tugs lay alongside. The sirens wailed the departure and hydrants hissed on the decks. The gangways rolled back and the telephones shrilled fore and aft. The winches rattled in the cables. The officers' whistles trilled. The tugs began to strain. A strip of water swelled between the ship and quay. The water was yellow, gurgling and far deeper than was comfortable. At midnight the "Empress of Ireland" was towed through the alley of life-buoys, eleven luminous galleries. The land clutched at her with its two white arms of fire for the last time. She sailed. A little star that hung swinging above a tremendous abyss. The eternal soft tremble of her plates, the gentle bum-bum-bum of her engines was soothing and drowsy. Bum-bum; every second bum-bum. The foreship smashed its path like a heavy hammer through the sea and smoke swirled over the wide white-foaming wake.

Above in the ship lived the captain. He thought of the bonus the company would pay him for a record voyage.

Away behind was the little white cabin of the

BITTER WATERS

First Engineer. He thought of the bonus the company would pay him for economy in coal consumption. In the brown teak structure on the boat deck lived the officers: they thought of the company's promotion lists. For'ard was the first bos'un's cabin. He thought of the bonus the company would pay him for cleanliness. Below at the bottom of the ship the chief stewards sat in the cool room in the eternal light of the electric bulbs. They thought of the tins of salmon and pineapples they would save and sell for their profit. The stokers who live amidship close above the water knew very well that when the first-class lady passengers do their hair on the windward side the combings fly down through the portholes and when the big gangways were lowered they could see up under their skirts. And that is all they knew. The barber thought of the scent he would sell. The first-class cooks thought of the extremely artistic food they must cook to please the passengers. The potatoes must look like canaries and the butter like a swan. The roast must look like a landscape with a lake of sauce. The Chinese launderers thought of a little house with a little garden in their native province. The Kosher cook thought

BITTER WATERS

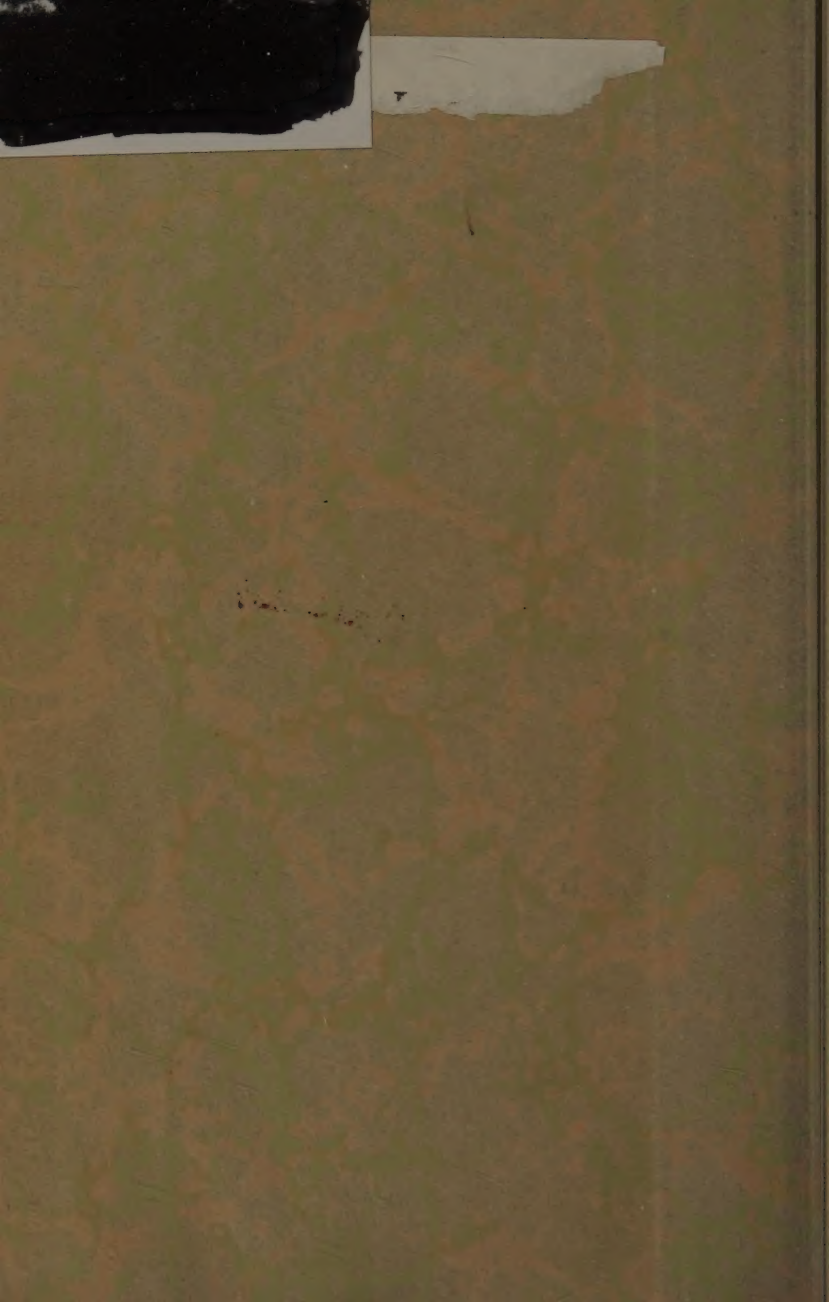
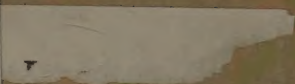
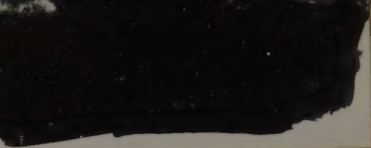
of his enemies among the crew and sang a psalm of David to confound them. The stewards thought of tips. The sailors thought of their wages and the price they would have to pay the girls in Java. The emigrants thought of their plants in their basket of moss and humid soil. The first-class passengers thought of the dinner bell. The seagulls swaying with motionless stretched wings in the ship's wake of wind behind the stern also thought of the dinner bell: they knew then that soon afterwards the scraps would be flung overboard.

It became warmer. The deckhands spread the awnings. The children glued their little mouths to the ice water taps. The ventilators hummed. The nights brought heavy storms. By day the sea was a leaden mirror. The "Empress of Ireland" was in the tropics. Each day and each night from twelve to four Seaman Glen was on watch. The "Empress of Ireland" sailed easily. She was a good ship.

THE END







Bitter waters

Balcony

